DEMOCRATIC SPACES
FOR POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION:
Lessons from Citizens' Assemblies in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Student declaration to accompany the submission of written work

School of Transnational Governance

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ABSTRACT

What comes first – reconciliation or democracy? Societies that are recovering from conflicts and transitioning to democracy are juggling the two important elements. Deliberative democracy can be a solution. In this paper, I research the impact of citizens' assemblies to post-conflict societies by examining the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I draw lessons from the two citizens' assemblies that have taken place in the country, Citizens' Assembly of Mostar and Citizens' Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and create a recommendation for the future implementation of assemblies in B&H. The analysis has shown that this model of deliberative democracy creates a space for reconciliation and encourages the citizens to take part in decision-making processes.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is facing a crisis worldwide. Citizens are losing trust in their elected representatives, so they are finding ways to express their dissatisfaction and get involved more directly. A deliberative approach to democracy offers citizens' assemblies as one of the options. Those are groups of citizens that are randomly selected, but that reflect a representative sample of the population. They get together to discuss important problems and vote on potential solutions. The topics range from issues of everyday functioning in local communities to more complex ones such as election regulations, climate change, same-sex marriage and abortion. Citizens' assemblies are being increasingly implemented locally, nationally and transnationally.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country transitioning to democracy and, due to its post-conflict nature, it is challenged with making a successful adaptation to this system. There have been two experiments with citizens' assemblies, one on the local level in Mostar and the other on the national level. In this master thesis I analyse those two assemblies to explore how regular implementation of this model would impact reconciliation and decision-making processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The recovery from the past conflict and the complex system of making decisions are intertwined in the country and significantly depend on one another. It is a vicious circle in which important political reforms are disabled due to frequent ethnic tensions and conflicting interests, and calming the tensions is difficult without a well-functioning state system. With no signs of moving on from this stalemate, the overall living conditions in the country are worsening, causing more and more people to move abroad. This is also slowing down Bosnia and Herzegovina's transition to democracy which poses the question of what needs to come first, reconciliation or democracy. Is reconciliation the condition for democracy or does a society need to become democratic in order to overcome the past conflict?

In attempting to identify the correlation between these essential aspects of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, it is important to examine the two citizens' assemblies, as first experiments in deliberative democracy in the country. This model of democracy has produced results in other countries, but as it is new to Bosnia and Herzegovina, its impact is yet to be evaluated. It offers more direct engagement of the citizens, includes tight

cooperation of people from different ethnic groups and their joint decision-making. In the long term and if implemented regularly, citizens' assemblies might be a way to create space for post-conflict reconciliation.

THE TOPIC IMPORTANCE AND THE EXPLORATION METHODS

This master thesis is the first research paper that explores two citizens' assemblies that have taken place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the local assembly in Mostar and the national assembly. The only academic publication published thus far on this topic is "Mostar Citizens' Assembly. The First Deliberative Process in Southeast Europe. Case Study" by Joanna Podgórska-Rykała[1]. The purpose of her paper is to use the Mostar case as an example for the reflection on deliberative processes and citizens' participation. The paper aims to offer an in-depth overview of the process of organising the assembly and its execution that can be used for finding relevant information about this specific deliberative process, as a resource for organising other assemblies, as well as for comparative purposes. Ahead of the national citizens' assembly, an opinion editorial[2] was published by Damir Kapidžić and Nenad Stojanović, members of the expert team working on its implementation. Their op-ed explained where the need for deliberative democratic practices comes from, and it briefly looked into some of the examples from other countries and from Mostar, and announced the national assembly and provided some information. While analysing the two citizens' assemblies, I utilised both of these publications, as well as a limited number of media articles, and took into account their findings.

Also, I consulted existing research on the concept and theory of citizens' assemblies and case studies on their practical applications worldwide, analyses of the citizens' assembly in Northern Ireland, as a divided society, as well as research on democracy in general in divided societies.

My aim is to make a practical contribution by exploring the two citizens' assemblies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and offering recommendations on how to further deploy them to serve reconciliation efforts.

The key research question is: *what can we learn from these citizens' assemblies*?

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[1] Joanna Podgórska-Rykała, "The First Deliberative Process in Southeast Europe. Case Study," in *Deliberation in the Public Policies Planning Process: Experiences and Future Challenges*, ed. Joanna Podgórska-Rykała and Jacek Sroka (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2022), 211-235, https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/74909

[2] Nenad Stojanović and Damir Kapidžić, "Kako pomoći BiH: Odgovor će pokušati dati 57 odabranih, ko su oni? [How to help B&H: The 57 chosen people will try to give an answer, who are they?]", *Oslobođenje*, December 3, 2021, https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/kako-pomoci-bih-odgovor-ce-pokusati-dati-57-odabranih-ko-su-oni-713076

I argue that the intensity of the citizens' collaboration and their dedication to common problem-solving was the key factor explaining the relative success of both assemblies. This diagnosis is based on different dimensions of the two assemblies, including the selection process of the representative sample, media coverage and the involvement of the general public, collaboration with the government, as well as the sensitivity of the topics. Through comparing these dimensions in the two assemblies and their outcomes, I explore the impact of each on reconciliation and decision-making process. While collecting the necessary data, I rely on the above-mentioned sources, as well as the websites of the assemblies that contain important materials and information on their organisation and implementation, the published citizens' recommendations and the official statements of the organisers, participants and other stakeholders.

The thesis unfolds as follows. In the first chapter, I start by briefly reflecting on the theoretical framework of the concept of citizens' assemblies and their potential impact on post-conflict and divided societies. As the thesis is practice-oriented and does not delve deep into theoretical discussions, this part serves as a general overview needed to provide an overall understanding of the main ideas. In the second chapter, I conduct a contextual analysis of the political and social situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its post-conflict setting based on the existing research and media content. In the third chapter, I discuss the two case studies of the two citizens' assemblies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Finally, I identify the recommendations for potentially tailoring an appropriate model of the citizens' assemblies for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This paper will be of use to those dealing with the topic of deliberative democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it unifies both citizens' assemblies. It can serve as a resource for policy-makers and practitioners from domestic and foreign institutions that intend to work on practical implementation of this type of democracy in the country. Researchers exploring citizens' assemblies and their various applications can utilise the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example of two different approaches. Hopefully, my thesis will spark inspiration for deeper research on the impact of citizens' assemblies to reconciliation.

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The Concept of Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are randomly selected groups of citizens that represent the demographic characteristics of a certain area. They are a type of mini-publics, which is a concept that was first introduced by Dahl and for him they represented a way of bringing the governments and the citizens into closer cooperation.[3]

There are a variety of applications of citizens' assemblies, but most of them have some key aspects in common. Usually, invitations are sent to randomly selected citizens and after the ones that accept to participate respond, the assembly is composed through a representative sample along a number of characteristics (gender, age, socio-economics, level of education etc.). Citizens' assemblies can be initiated and organised by various actors, including the states, international organisations, NGOs, civil society organisations and associations of citizens.

The process of conducting the assemblies themselves most often consists of four phases, as explained by Lambertz[4]. The first is the learning phase, in which the citizens meet each other and get introduced to the concept of assemblies and familiarised with the upcoming process. The topic of the assembly is usually either chosen by the organisers beforehand or co-opted with the participants during the initial sessions. In this phase the citizens receive learning material for the topic that will be discussed and attend a few sessions to get informed about it.

The second phase is consultation, when experts in the topic and different stakeholders present their viewpoints to the participants and share their ideas for solutions. This enables the citizens to hear various perspectives, ask questions and ultimately start forming their own attitudes.

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[3] Robert Alan Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 338, https://eui.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=52831 &site=ehost-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_COVER

[4] Karl-Heinz Lambertz, "Beyond elections: The use of deliberative methods in European municipalities and regions," *Congress of Local and Regional Authorities*, (Strasbourg: March 23, 2022), 21, https://rm.coe.int/0900001680a5b00d

In the third, deliberation phase, the participants work both individually and together to come up with potential recommendations, which they present to each other and discuss.

The final phase is decision-making, when the citizens gather in a more formal assembly setting, present final recommendations and vote.[5] After the assembly process is concluded the chosen recommendations are presented to relevant government authorities. Depending on how institutionalised citizens' assemblies are, the recommendations can be more or less binding.

The citizens' assemblies that result in the implementation of the recommendations give the citizens a sense of responsibility and involvement in the decision-making system. By participating in such processes, the citizens feel that their opinion matters and brings practical changes, which may motivate them to become more active in following the political and social situation in their community, country or region. According to Merkel and others, citizens' assemblies can increase the interest in participation in democratic processes of less active citizens and the ones that lost faith in the political institutions and include various perspectives in that way. They can also serve to recover this trust towards the government and build a stronger cooperation between the people and their representatives. "In the best-case scenario they promote a constructive exchange between different positions, contribute to more thoughtful opinion-formation, temper the polarisation of society, and thus inform public discourse."[6]

Strong polarisation is one of the reasons why the government officials can lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. As noted by Dryzek and others, in occasions when it escalates to the point that political discussions become marked with uncivilised rhetoric instead of argumentative debates, the citizens stop paying attention to the content or stop following the discourse entirely. On the other hand, well-structured citizens' assemblies are designed to motivate a different working environment, based on mutual respect, understanding, active listening, reflection and open-mindedness.[7] "(…) deliberative

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Wolfgang Merkel, Filip Milačić and Andreas Schäfer, *Citizens' Assemblies: New Ways to Democratize Democracy* (Vienna: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), 10, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/18489.pdf
[7] John S. Dryzek et al., "The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation," *Science,* vol. 363, iss. 6432, (March 15, 2019): 1144-1146, 1145, https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aaw2694

democracy 'works' best when these processes are designed well, meaning that they can help us solve societal challenges better, overcome polarization and strengthen trust."[8]

Vermeersch underlines that establishing democratic institutions and enabling the basic forms of citizens' democratic engagement does not put an end to the process. He claims that the citizens are more likely to embrace reconceptualization and rethinking of democracy, as the politicians are often limited to their duties within a mandate and are not open to experimenting.[9] The increasing use of citizens' assemblies and their evident success shows this dynamic and vivid nature of democracy. In its essence, democracy is an ongoing process that is susceptible to change and that should be restructured when needed. "It is only through constantly revitalising democracy that democracy will be kept alive."[10]

This is all the more true for post-conflict societies, that are burdened with internal ethnic and political divisions, often face stagnations caused by strong disagreements and lack of compromise among political representatives. In these contexts, the memory of conflict as well as the grievances that follow, as well as stark differences in the goals and priorities of different ethnic groups in addition to the normal differences between citizens, can make it even more difficult than elsewhere for them to find common grounds.

In divided societies, the process of transitioning to democracy and low citizens' familiarity with their democratic rights and duties limits their propensity for active participation.

How can citizens' assemblies contribute in these cases?

Citizens' assemblies can bring together people from different ethnic backgrounds to discuss problems that affect their cities or countries that are common to all. Through finding solutions to issues such as education, health or social policy, the citizens are encouraged to focus on their commonalities instead of their differences and they can be reminded that they all go through many similar experiences regardless of their ethnic, religious, or any other affiliation. According to Dembinska and Montambeault, deliberation has the power to raise

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[8] Claudia Chwalitz, "A Movement That's Quietly Reshaping Democracy For The Better," *Noema*, May 12, 2022, https://www.noemamag.com/a-movement-thats-quietly-reshaping-democracy-for-the-better/

[9] Peter Vermeersch, "Innovating Democracy in Times of Crisis: Solution or Utopia?", April 2013, 4, https://www.petervermeersch.net/uploads/2/5/3/1/2531565/open_citizenship_article_april_2013.pdf

[10] Ibid.

the awareness of shared values and interests which leads to "mutual and reciprocal understanding and, eventually, recognition and reconciliation within a shared political community (within which multiple identities can live together)."[11] When it comes to implementation of deliberative processes, the authors underline the importance of reflecting on the possible motivation for the citizens to work together and ensuring that the discussion in the spirit of deliberation, not negotiation.[12]

O'Flynn argues that, although citizens in divided societies might not have an intense feeling for national identity, it can become more prominent in certain contexts. For instance, a realisation that internal tensions cause consequences such as bad economic situation or external interference, might become an incentive to strengthen national identity for the greater good. Deliberative democracy, he claims, can help in this process if it is properly institutionalised.[13]

Examples of Northern Ireland and Belgium

Depending on the political and social needs of the area in which it is being implemented, citizens' assemblies can be designed in very different forms. It is of immense importance to tailor them to fit the particularities of an environment in order to achieve a productive outcome. To explore how this model of deliberative democracy works in the complexity of divided societies, I looked into the example of Northern Ireland, where one citizens' assembly has taken place so far. With the aim to examine ways of successful institutionalisation, I analysed Ostbelgien, a region which has a developed system of permanent citizens' assemblies.

Northern Ireland

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[11] Magdalena Dembinska and Françoise Montambeault, "Deliberation for Reconciliation in Divided Societies," *Journal of Public Deliberation*, vol. 11, no. 1, (May 2015): 12, https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol11/iss1/art12

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ian O'Flynn, *Deliberative Democracy and Divided Societies*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 36, https://www-cambridge-org.eui.idm.oclc.org/core/books/deliberative-democracy-and-divided-societies/444FEA872D4EA6B67145B7BC505CC28E

In Northern Ireland, a citizens' assembly took place in 2018 as a result of a civil society initiative. The topic was the reform of the social care system for the elderly that would make it responsive to the upcoming challenges and it was the first attempt at using this model of deliberative democracy to tackle a crucial problem.

It was organised by Involve, a UK public participation charity that works on including the citizens in the decision-making processes and exploring new ways of their political engagement. To ensure objectivity and fairness of the entire process, an oversight body was established in the form of an advisory group. It was composed of researchers and practitioners that are experienced in the areas of democracy, governance and divided societies. They took part in the design of the programme, choice of the topic and preparation of the various materials used. Another expert body, composed of people knowledgeable in the area of social care, was created to assist in the composition of learning materials and the selection of speakers who will present their experiences and opinions to the participants.

An independent recruitment service, LucidTalk, was in charge of selecting the demographically representative sample of the population of Northern Ireland. Some of the criteria taken into consideration were age, gender, education, place of residence, socio-economic situation, ethnicity. Out of 80 selected citizens, 77 participated in the process.

The citizens' met for several weekends and they worked in small facilitated groups to ensure enough time is dedicated for in-depth conversations about the topic. The citizens also listened to presentations by the experts in the area, as well as the users of the social care, to gain a comprehensive overview of the situation. The discussions between the participants took place between presentations and they jointly set out some crucial issues. "Different points of view certainly emerged, often passionately articulated, but the constructive energy around the room – and the collegial atmosphere – was palpable."[14]

A study of public and elite opinion carried out in Northern Ireland[15] suggests that the citizens would be supportive of decision-making processes in the form of citizens' assemblies and

[14] "Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland," Citizens' Assembly for Northern Ireland, 2019, https://citizensassemblyni.org/

[15] John Garry et al., "The Perception of the Legitimacy of Citizens' Assemblies in Deeply Divided Places? Evidence of Public and Elite Opinion from Consociational Northern Ireland," *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 57, (March 2021): 532-551, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.4

consider them legitimate, even in case they disagree with the adopted recommendations. People with particularly strong ideological standpoints seemed to be less open to these processes. More scepticism was found among political representatives who tend to believe that elections are more in line with democratic principles than citizens' assemblies as decision-making bodies. They were, however, open towards citizens' assemblies with non-binding recommendations and showed willingness to consider them or open them for referendum voting. The authors of the study conclude that there is a fertile ground for implementing citizens' assemblies in Northern Ireland and that challenges and potential setbacks should be kept in mind to increase the perception of the legitimacy of citizens' assemblies.[16]

According to Pow, the assembly in Northern Ireland shows that the citizens in divided societies are capable of discussing complex issues and working together without tensions. He finds that, even though the issue discussed did not have an ethnical component, the assembly was a positive experience, just as it was in less divided places.[17] This can be an indication that, when the citizens focus on resolving problems that are common to all and politically less sensitive, they are willing to put divisions and disagreements aside to work out the solutions. If this is the case, citizens' assemblies can represent more than a way of developing democratic principles and strengthening citizens' involvement. They can be a step towards reconciliation and healthy cohabitation.

Belgium[18]

Ostbelgien, the German-speaking community in the Eastern Belgium, is an example of a region that regularly implements citizens' assemblies, which enables the people to have an institutionalised contribution to the decision-making processes.

This region has a permanent Citizens' Council which is composed of 24 members and has a mandate in the duration of one and a half year. During this time, they can schedule up to three

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[16] Ibid.

[17] James Timothy Pow, "Mini-Publics and the Maxi-Public: Investigating the Perceived Legitimacy of Citizens' Assemblies in a Deeply Divided Place" (PhD diss., Queen's University Belfast, 2019), 242-243, https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/298978ae-19fb-4a48-86e8-db986b8bb39a

[18] Information on the citizens' assemblies in Ostbelgien taken from: Yves Dejaeghere, "How Ostbelgien became a trailblazer in deliberative democracy," interview by Ieva Cesnulaityte, *Participo*, April 30, 2020, https://medium.com/participo/how-ostbelgien-became-a-trailblazer-in-deliberative-democracy-62c3bb1fa560

Citizens' Panels and are in charge of agenda setting. The Council was founded by the Parliament of Ostbelgien, so „the idea to give citizens a more permanent and meaningful voice in decision making came from politicians."[19] Six of the members are randomly selected citizens that were the participants of a previous Citizens' Panel. Six of them are politicians that represent each political party. Twelve members are randomly selected citizens from Ostbelgien. A rotation takes place every six months, when one third of the Council is replaced.

The Citizens' Council opens a call for topic proposals and all Ostbelgien citizens are eligible to send their ideas. The suggestions that have over 100 signatures of support are considered by the Council, which then decides on the final topic and organises a Citizens' Panel. There can be from 25 up to 50 citizens as members of each Panel and they represent the overall population of Ostbelgien. The meetings of the Citizens' Panel take place three times. The members of the Panel are initially introduced to the topic with the help of experts that are invited to comment on the issue. Afterwards, they debate among each other and vote on potential recommendations.

After the final recommendations are agreed, the Panel meets with a committee of the members of Ostbelgien Parliament to present the suggestions and engage in a discussion. It is not mandatory for the Parliament to adopt the recommendations, but it is obliged to consider them and respond. In case of acceptance, the relevant ministries are in charge of the implementation and the Citizens' Council has a monitoring role in this process.

The idea of the permanent Citizens' Council originates from 2017, when the Parliament of Ostbelgien organised a citizens' assembly to discuss the topic of childcare policy. The assembly process was successful and the recommendations of the citizens were accepted by the Parliament and became a part of the Childcare Masterplan for 2025. The Parliament cooperated with a civil society organisation, G1000, to design a permanent model for citizens' participation. Since 2019, the Citizens' Council and the Citizens' Panels are regularly taking place.

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[19] Silvia Ellena, "Deliberative democracy in eastern Belgium: A model to scale up?" *Euractiv*, March 27, 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/participatory-democracy/news/deliberative-democracy-in-eastern-belgium-a-model-to-scale-up/

THE CASE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Post-conflict Political and Social Complexity

The current political system of Bosnia and Herzegovina was created after the conflict dissolution of Yugoslavia through the General Framework Agreement For Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina[20] signed in Dayton in 1995. In its process of recovering from the conflict and transitioning to democracy, the country is struggling with the effectiveness of the decision-making system and with reconciliation.

It is a home to Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, the three ethnic groups that are equal according to the Constitution, and minorities. The country is politically and administratively divided into two entities and a district. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is an entity with a majority of Bosniaks and Croats, while the citizens of the Republic of Srpska are mainly Serbs. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is further divided into ten cantons that have their own governments, including ministries and parliamentary assemblies, as well as statutes. The Brčko District is a separate administrative unit, made of only one city, that does not belong to any of the entities, but to the state. Bosnia and Herzegovina has three members of the presidency, one for each ethnicity. The representatives of Bosniaks and Croats are elected in the Federation of B&H and the representative of Serbs in the Republic of Srpska.

To end the conflict and ensure equality of the three ethnic groups, the Dayton Agreement envisaged a layered and complex decision-making system. The Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples. The main roles of the Assembly are to approve laws and budget, appoint members of the Council of Ministers and give authorisation for the ratification of international agreements and treaties.[21] There are 42 members of the House of Representatives and they are selected directly through elections. Two thirds of them are chosen from the territory of the Federation of B&H and one third from the Republic of Srpska, as the former is larger and consists of two

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[20] United Nations, General Assembly, Security Counsel, "General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," U.N. Doc. A/50/790 – S/1995/999 (November 29, 1995), https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/BA_951121_DaytonAgreement.pdf
[21] "About Parliament: Constitution and Main Regulations," Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://www.parlament.ba/Content/Read/24?title=Op%C4%87ipodaci&lang=en

majority ethnic groups, while the latter consists of one.[22] The House of Peoples has 15 members, five from each ethnic group, and their role is to ensure the fulfilment of the needs and interests of the ethnicity they represent. The representatives of Bosniaks and Croats are elected by the House of Peoples of the Federation of B&H and the representatives of Serbs are elected by the National Assembly of Republic of Srpska.[23] Any proposition in the House of Peoples can be blocked if it jeopardises the vital national interest of Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs. That the vital national interests are compromised determines the majority of votes of the representatives of one ethnic group.[24]

While the establishment of this system might have been necessary to ensure peace and the only option all the conflicted parties would consent to, it is now causing frequent stagnations due to strong political disagreements. The constitution and the electoral law that are based on this ethnic division are also discriminatory and deep reforms are required to amend that. For instance, since the members of the Presidency and the delegates in the House of Peoples do not represent all citizens, but only one of the three major ethnic groups they belong to, there is no institution or body that advocates the interests of the minorities. Another example is the oversight of the citizens that do come from one of the three ethnic groups, but do not live in the entity where their ethnicity is the majority. To illustrate, Serbs living in the Federation of B&H, where the Bosniaks and Croats constitute the majority, are not able to vote for Serb representatives or to run in elections. Vice versa, the same happens to Bosniaks and Croats living in the Republic of Srpska, the majorly Serb entity. According to Vejnović and Trivanović, a governance structure that is founded on socio-historical and ethno-cultural specificities is not able to set and maintain a stable political order.[25]

Even though Bosnia and Herzegovina has been transitioning to democracy since the war ended, it is still far from truly putting it into practice. Vejnović and Trivanović argue that a system which presumes ethnic or class interests to the citizens at the expense of the interests

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[22] "House of Representatives: General Info," Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://www.parlament.ba/Content/Read/58?title=Op%C4%87ipodaci

[23] "House of Peoples: General Info," Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://www.parlament.ba/Content/Read/36?title=Op%C4%87ipodaci

[24] "House of Peoples: Vital National Interest," Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://www.parlament.ba/Content/Read/39?title=Vitalninacionalniinteres

[25] Duško Vejnović and Boris Trivanović, "Demokratija, kultura dijaloga, tolerancija i etnički odnosi u Bosni i Hercegovini, [Democracy, culture of dialogue, tolerance and ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina]," *Defendologija* 26, no. 49-50, (February 2022): 11, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358798774_Demokratija_kultura_dijaloga_tolerancija_i_etnicki_odnosi_u_Bosni_i_Hercegovini

of each individual is non-democratic in its core.[26] More obstacles to developing democracy can be found both among the citizens and the government. The government officials do not find it in their interest to encourage and enhance democracy, as giving more voice and power to the citizens would compromise their political functions. As underlined in the recent evaluation report of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption, there is a loophole in the law concerning policies that prevent corruption among the people in the government that hold top executive functions and the law enforcement agencies. The absence of implementation of prevention and sanction measures against corruption adds to the political stagnation and disables enforcement of reforms.[27]

Since the governmental system is layered and made of many institutions on several different levels, the bureaucratic apparatus is large and employs a lot of people. Many of those employees are placed in those positions because of their connections and affiliations with the ruling political parties. This expands the corruption problem to the citizens as well, who are then hesitant to oppose the government and continue giving their votes to the parties that secured their jobs. As the number of these citizens and their family members is significant, they can notably impact the outcome of the elections.

In addition, according to Pod lupom, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to election observation, citizens do not trust the integrity of the electoral process, since there are many irregularities, such as preventing the election observers from working, filling out the ballots in advance, incorrectly counting and registering votes. For instance, after the 2020 Local elections, the prosecutors did not conduct criminal proceedings against individuals who committed the irregularities and the financial sanctions are so small that it pays off to commit electoral fraud.[28]

Another explanation of the democratic passiveness of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina is that they are accustomed to one-party system and their perception of the relationship between them and the government relies on their past experiences. They are aware of the

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption, *Evaluation Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (Strasbourg: GRECO, 2023), https://rm.coe.int/fifth-evaluation-round-preventing-corruption-and-promoting-integrity-i/1680aa76dc

[28] „Sramni iznosi sankcija i krivična djela koja se ne tretiraju. [Shameful sums of sanctions and crimes that are not treated]," *Pod lupom*, May 2023, https://podlupom.org/press-kutak/vijesti/sramni-iznosi-sankcija-i-krivicna-djela-koja-se-ne-tretiraju-zasto-gradani-bih-nemaju-povjerenje-u-izborni-proces/

corruption in the government, realise that the pre-election promises are rarely fulfilled and are dissatisfied with the overall quality of life. However, many citizens seem to feel that it is neither their responsibility to change the situation nor that they are able to. Another factor that undermines the potential of democratic practices is the citizens' tendency for an emotional approach to politics. Many have the need to remain loyal to a certain political party or a politician and they defend their actions regardless of their actual validity. Similarly to rooting for the favourite sports team, the citizens keep supporting their parties even though they are not content with the results of their work, and consistently opposing all the others. This allows the politicians to keep serving empty promises and working for their personal benefits. In democratically more developed countries, the relationship between the citizens and the governments is more professional and transactional. If the voters are not satisfied with the work of their government, they do not re-elect it or they ask for resignations in more urgent cases. Voting is viewed as a merit-based process, as opposed to passionate favouritism.

To ensure they win the votes again, the ethnic-based political parties use this emotional approach of the citizens and increase the rhetoric that emphasises divisions prior to elections. Votes are not gathered based on political programmes and reform plans, but on stories of 'us against them' and installing fear by speaking of war and conflict. They use them to convince the citizens that they will defend their ethnic interests and that they will provide some sort of protection in that regard. Cipek argues that this populist rhetoric comes down to painting a black and white picture of complex political and economic events. As he says, the communication is based on accusations, conspiracy theories and scandals.[29] The heated debates among these parties take up most of the media space and draw a lot of attention, which causes the civil political parties that promote the country's unity to remain insignificant. Consequently, the same ethnic-based political parties get re-elected for new mandates.

To change the situation and increase the democratic involvement of the citizens, it is needed to raise people's awareness of the significance of their active presence in the political life, according to Kazazić and Omerdić. The improvement of the economic conditions would also

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[29] Tihomir Cipek, „Političke ideologije, [Political ideologies]," in *Ideološki profil glasača i apstinenata u Bosni i Hercegovini [Ideological profile of voters and abstainers in Bosnia and Herzegovina],* ed. Srđan Puhalo, (Banja Luka: Art print, 2008): 13-41, 36, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/06047.pdf

contribute to willingness for participation, as material instability produces political apathy.[30] Dialogue represents a categorical imperative, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina where multiple religions and ethnicities coexist, Vejnović and Trivanović underline. The authors explain that, in a society where speeches are held instead of conversations, the relations revolve around power and not cooperation.[31] As Cipek noted, democracy is best built by politically engaged citizens.[32]

Protests and Plenums in 2014[33]

How do citizens' assemblies fit into the entangled social image of Bosnia and Herzegovina? The first example reaches back to 2014, when the citizens united in mass protests. What started with employees of several factories demanding their rights turned into the largest demonstrations since the war when citizens all over the country joined to support them. Under the slogan We are Hungry in Three Languages, the people sent a message that they are tired of divisions and asked for reforms in social policy and resignations of certain government officials. Although some requests were fulfilled and some of the officials did resign from their positions, the protests did not cause any major success. They turned violent and destructive, which only gave more reason to the government representatives not to take the demonstrations and the requests seriously and to suppress them.

However, a democratic spirit emerged during the protests, as the citizens spontaneously organised themselves in plenums in a few cities. In trying to express their distrust towards

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[30] Vesna Kazazić and Dženeta Omerdić, "Elementi demokratije u (post)dejtonskoj Bosni i Hercegovini, [Elements of democracy in (post)Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina], *DHS-Društvene i humanističke studije: časopis Filozofskog fakulteta u Tuzli, [SHS-Social and humanistic studies: journal of the Faculty of Philosophy in Tuzla]*, iss. 8, (March, 2019): 311-328, https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=766645

[31] Vejnović and Trivanović, "Demokratija, kultura dijaloga, tolerancija i etnički odnosi u Bosni i Hercegovini, [Democracy, culture of dialogue, tolerance and ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina]," 18.

[32] Cipek, "Političke ideologije, [Political ideologies]," 39.

[33] Information on the protests and plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina taken from:
S.M. and D.O., „Treća godišnjica protesta: Šta se dogodilo sa protestantima, premijerima, plenumima, građanskoj hrabrosti?, [Third anniversary of the protests: What happened with the demonstrators, prime ministers, plenums, civic courage?]", *Žurnal*, February 7, 2017, https://zurnal.info/clanak/sta-se-dogodilo-sa-protestantima-premijerima-plenumima-gradanskoj-hrabrosti/20288
Goran Marković, „BIH, četiri godine poslije Plenuma, [B&H, four years after the plenums]," *Novi plamen*, February 9, 2018, https://www.noviplamen.net/glavna/cetiri-godine-poslije-nije-bilo-uzalud/
„Bosna i Hercegovina: 'I onda je od jednom bilo 3.000 ljudi na ulici', [And suddenly, there was 3.000 people on the street]," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, May 20, 2014, https://ba.boell.org/bhs/2014/05/20/bosna-i-hercegovina-i-onda-je-od-jednom-bilo-3000-ljudi-na-ulici

political institutions and formulate their requests in a more concrete way, the citizens thought of plenums as a way to make their voice heard directly and not through various representatives. This was a time of optimism and hope in Bosnia and Herzegovina that sparked media headlines such as "The Bosnian Spring". The discussions initially took place on streets and afterwards in different halls and auditoriums. They were open to anyone interested and consisted of citizens sharing their concerns, problems and frustrations with each other and suggesting potential requests that can be made towards the government.

The citizens realised the need of organising the plenums in some way, so they formed working groups that were in charge of different topics. It was easier to have a constructive discussion in smaller groups and by focusing on a specific area. However, in order to make the plenums permanent and for them to fulfil their purpose, they needed a more structured programme and a long-term strategy. There were supposed to be regulations regarding leadership and membership questions and clear guidelines for future work. The citizens were hesitant because they were not in favour of any kind of structure that would remind of a political party or an organisation from the fear that it would become merely one of many such bodies and bring no concrete progress. Another aspect that the plenums lacked were clear ideas and sustainable proposals. The issues they were tackling were important and, although the suggestions made sense, they were not designed in a way to provide long-term solutions as the participants did not seem to be ready to engage with politics and reforms as much. The requests that did deal with deep systemic changes were about reforming the tax system, reforming the strike legislation and including the employees in the company governing processes.

As the plenums remained chaotic, they dispersed over time. Yet, they did show the will of the people to get actively involved in some form of decision-making and indicated that, with a better organisation, this type of democracy is certainly an option.

CASE STUDY OF TWO CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Citizens' Assembly of Mostar

The first citizens' assembly in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a local one, taking place in Mostar, one of the most ethnically divided and politically entangled cities in the country. Precisely for that reason it is also one of the cities in which stronger citizens' democratic engagement is needed. Mostar is split between two ethnic groups, Bosniaks and Croats, that live on separate sides of the Neretva river. Because of strong political disagreements, local elections were not held in Mostar from 2008 until 2020, which caused difficulties in the daily functioning of the city. After the new government took office in 2021, it was challenged to deal with the many issues that piled up over time.

The citizens' assembly that took place in July of 2021 was a contribution to the government's efforts and a way to directly include the citizens in the decision-making process. It was supported and funded by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe through the project „Building democratic participation in the City of Mostar", and as a part of the Council of Europe Action Plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2021. The aim was to support Mostar as a leader in innovative democratic practices and to encourage active political and social involvement of the citizens. The transparency and visibility of the process were on a high level and all the information are easily accessible through the official website of the assembly.[34]

The governance structure of this assembly was created following the examples of best practices from other deliberative democratic processes worldwide, while keeping in mind the particularities of the Mostar case. It consisted of several organising teams. The design team was made of the Council of Europe project team, two international experts and one local expert, to ensure the presence of different perspectives and experiences. Their responsibilities were to create a rulebook that contains rules and guidelines for the process, formulate a timeline of the assembly, design methodology for topic selection, design the random selection process, choose the facilitators and jointly with them design the process of the assembly.

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[34] "Citizens' Assembly of Mostar 2021," Mostar gradimo, https://mostargradimo.ba/en/home/

The coordinating team, that involved the Council of Europe project team and local actors and collaborators, was in charge of conducting the random selection process of the participants, selection of experts and stakeholders, preparation of the learning phase of the programme, organising the meetings of the participants, writing the final report that includes the citizens' recommendations.

The oversight team was composed of members of the City Council of Mostar from all political groups, members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, representatives of the local academic community from the University of Mostar, representatives of non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and informal groups. The role of this team was to supervise the process and ensure that it is in accordance with the previously established standards from the rulebook.

The members of the arbitration team were representatives of national academic community, international experts in the area of deliberative democracy and a representative of the Association of Municipalities and Cities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In case of violation of certain standards, their role was to act towards reinsuring that the standards are respected.

The topic selection started with conducting an online survey open to all citizens of Mostar older than 16, who could suggest any topic they found important. Based on the survey responses, three predominant topics were set out in consultation with local government institutions and NGOs. Those were cleanliness and maintenance of public spaces, reducing unemployment by creating new job opportunities, and supporting youth in starting own businesses. When the invitation letters for participation in the assembly were sent out, the citizens who were interested also voted for one of the three topics. The topic that won the most votes was cleanliness and maintenance of public city areas.[35]

To choose the participants of the citizens' assembly, invitation letters were sent to 5.000 randomly selected households in the City of Mostar. Citizens aged 16 or above could express their interest by phone, electronically or by registering at a designated mailbox. Those

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[35] Podgórska-Rykała, "The First Deliberative Process in Southeast Europe. Case Study," 220-223.

citizens would then receive a questionnaire that assisted the design team in selecting participants that reflect a representative sample of the Mostar population. The selection criteria that ensured diversity and suitable representation were gender, age group, education level, city district, economic situation and ethnicity. Out of the interested citizens, 40 were selected to participate, plus 8 additional participants to serve as a replacement in case of cancelling.

The basis for the creation of standards set for the assembly were the principles that democracy is for everyone, that people are the sovereign in a democracy and that its goal is to improve the quality of life. The guiding principles were also that the process needs to be organised in a fair and credible way and that the goal of the assembly is to accomplish high quality and well thought out decisions.

The question which the citizens were answering through this deliberative process was how can the City of Mostar improve the cleanliness of public space to make it more pleasant for its citizens. They worked on this question through several thematic areas: landscaping and use of public spaces and creation of new ones, raising awareness and education of citizens, re-organisation of the public utility companies, waste management, and institutionalisation of citizens' assembly as a legal framework for further action. The citizens came up with a series of specific recommendations, such as restoring, preserving and enlarging green areas, placing warning signs in public spaces where waste disposal is forbidden, maintenance of swimming and picknick areas, reducing the number of jobs in administration and increasing the number of field work positions.

Aside from the recommendations dealing with the given topic, the citizens deemed necessary that some suggestions tackle the vision of the future of citizens' assemblies in their community. The first such recommendation is aimed at the Mayor of Mostar and it urges him to collaborate with the Council of Europe project team to create an institutional format of the citizens' assembly as an advisory body of the City of Mostar. The second one is to present the recommendations to the City Council and for the Council members to approve and implement the recommendations. The third one refers to developing an action plan for the implementation of the recommendations and calls for inclusion of financing or co-financing of the citizens' assembly and its recommendations in the draft of the budget for 2022. As much as 97,5% of assembly members voted for the first recommendation and a 100% voted

for the other two. This indicates that the citizens find assemblies to be a desirable decision-making tool and shows their willingness to engage in such democratic practices in the future.

Citizens' Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The second citizens' assembly in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place in February of 2022 on a national level. It was initiated by the European Union delegation in the country and the topics that were on the table were the constitutional crisis and the reform of the electoral law.[36]

The selection process was similar to the one in Mostar and it was conducted in collaboration with the IPSOS research institute. Invitation letters were sent to 4.000 randomly selected citizens across Bosnia and Herzegovina and about 200 of them responded, which is similar to the average response rate in other European countries. A representative sample of 57 citizens was then chosen, as this is a number of members of both chambers of the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 49 people ultimately attended the assembly. Demographic characteristics were taken into account during the final selection process, including age, gender, residence and ethnic affiliation.

The process consisted of three phases. The first one was the learning phase, led by independent facilitators and experts in deliberative democracy, in which the participants met each other and jointly established some rules and guidelines for the work that were acceptable to all. They got familiarised both with the concept of citizens assemblies and the topics discussed. They learned about the existing issues with the constitution and the electoral law, their discriminatory provisions and the problems they cause to the citizens. Experts in the areas of human rights, electoral legislation and constitutional law presented their different viewpoints regarding the constitution and the electoral law of Bosnia and Herzegovina and potential solutions to the current issues. The citizens were also presented with the solutions advocated by different political parties. This multi-layered approach allowed the citizens to hear various opinions and get thoroughly informed.

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[36] Stojanović and Kapidžić, "Kako pomoći BiH: Odgovor će pokušati dati 57 odabranih, ko su oni? [How to help B&H: The 57 chosen people will try to give an answer, who are they?]".

As a part of their discussions with experts, the members of the assembly identified the problems they believed were crucial. Those were the election regulations, matters of equality of the ethnic groups, the institutions of the Presidency and the Parliamentary Chamber of the Peoples, corruption and malversation in the election process.

The second phase were the consultations of the assembly members with the communities they come from. They were done either informally through conversations with their families and friends, or in an organised way through public discussions. In this case, due to time constraints, the informal approach was chosen. In between two weekend sessions, the participants spoke to people in their communities about the topics they learned about.

The third phase is dedicated to active discussion and coming up with joint recommendations. Each participant had the opportunity to share viewpoints and potential recommendations with the others, and the discussions took place firstly in smaller groups and then all together. The suggestions that were largely supported were sent for final voting. During the voting process, the assembly members could opt to support a certain recommendation entirely or partially, to reject it entirely or partially, or to remain neutral. Each of these voting options was associated with a number of points which were than added. For a recommendation to be accepted it needed to have more than two thirds of the overall possible number of points. In case 15% of the members or more disagreed with a proposal, it would be further discussed and possibly changed.

One of the experts engaged in the assembly, Nenad Stojanović, described that the citizens who participated in this process were "disciplined, committed, interested, serious"[37]. He commented that the situation was similar to other assemblies he was engaged with in this aspect, because once the citizens accept the responsibility, they usually take it very seriously and are grateful to have their voices heard. When it comes to inter-ethnic tensions, Stojanović reported that they were not present in the discussions. "In the difficult context of Bosnia, working with citizens gives some hope, because they show that they are able to overcome these barriers, real or presumed, and work to build something together."[38]

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[37] Nenad Stojanović, "Bosnia and Herzegovina, experiments in deliberative democracy," interview by Serena Epis, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa*, October 1, 2022, https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bosnia-Herzegovina/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina-experiments-in-deliberative-democracy-220852
[38] Ibid.

Some of the recommendations the citizens came up with were removing discrimination and enabling all citizens to elect and be elected, establishing women's political education programmes to motivate their political engagement, adding a fourth member of the Presidency to represent minorities, removing the House of the Peoples, changing electoral and criminal legislation to adequately respond to the problem of corruption, educating the citizens on the electoral process, ensuring transparency of the election process and simplified system of reporting irregularities, introducing a requirement of minimum 50% of women on the election lists, as well as making voting mandatory.[39]

Simultaneously with the process of the first national citizens' assembly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political representatives were also meeting to discuss the issue of the electoral laws. These questions have been the subject of heated political debates for years and these talks once again ended with no agreement. Damir Kapidžić, one of the experts involved with the process, commented on how the citizens perceived these political negotiations. The citizens were following these events in the media, as it was the central topic at the time, and they were aware of the fact that the political representatives were not ready for dialogue and not willing to compromise at all. In comparison, Kapidžić said that the citizens' assembly looked entirely differently and that the participants reflected openness towards communication and hearing the attitudes of others. Compromise and dialogue were the most frequently mentioned words, according to Kapidžić. The citizens saw that this is what the political negotiations are missing and that they wanted to show that they can do better than their government.[40]

The organisers attempted to engage local actors and political representatives in the citizens' assembly process. A presentation for journalists took place, group of representatives of the Parliament was contacted and invitations were sent to representatives of different political parties to join the first meeting with the assembly members. Only three of them attended.[41]

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[39] "Preporuke skupštine građana BiH, [Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly of B&H]," Skupština građana Bosne i Hercegovine, https://skupstinagradjana.ba/index.php/novosti-prikaz

[40] A. Dučić, "Dok Čović i Izetbegović "lome koplja" o Izbornom zakonu, uskoro stiže novi prijedlog, [While Čović and Izetbegović are "breaking spears" on the Electoral Law, a new proposal is coming soon]," *Fokus*, 2022, https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/dok-covic-i-izetbegovic-lome-koplja-o-izbornom-zakonu-uskoro-stize-novi-prijedlog/2264947

[41] Stojanović, interview.

The outcomes of the assembly and the citizens' recommendations were presented to a group of members of the Parliament. However, no other steps were taken by the political representatives and the recommendations were not further considered or discussed. Stojanović noted that, keeping in mind the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he did not expect more involvement of the government representatives and that most members of the Parliament are not ready to follow the recommendations.[42]

The presence of the assembly in media space, academic community and public discourse was very low and likely many citizens were not even aware that it was happening. Several articles have been published in newspapers and portals, but no additional attention was received. Had the assembly been more present in the public space, perhaps the members of the Parliament would have taken the recommendations more seriously and offered at least some kind of response and feedback.

Two more citizens' assemblies are currently in preparation with the support of the Council of Europe. The citizens of Banja Luka will discuss the topic of youth entrepreneurship and the citizens of Mostar will delve into economy and tourism development.[43]

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[42] Ibid.

[43] "Council of Europe Congress supports the City of Mostar in the organisation of a second deliberative process," Mostar gradimo, March 2, 2023, https://mostargradimo.ba/en/council-of-europe-congress-supports-the-city-of-mostar-in-the-organisation-of-a-second-deliberative-process/

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

The final outcomes of the two assemblies greatly differed. The local assembly in Mostar resulted in implementation of the citizens' recommendations, while the national one had no practical aftermath and the suggestions remained theoretical.

To assess the reasons for these opposing outcomes of the assemblies and evaluate their potential impact on reconciliation and decision-making process, there are several aspects of the assemblies to be taken into consideration. Firstly, the selection of the participants. Both in Mostar and in the national assembly, the citizens were chosen in the same way. Invitations were sent to randomly selected addresses and the representative sample was chosen out of the citizens who responded. Since the approach to selection was the same, this was not a factor that contributed to different outcomes in terms of acceptance of recommendations, but it might have had influence on the citizens' attitudes towards the process. As the representative sample was chosen from the citizens that expressed their interest in participating, certain self-selection was already made. The citizens that accepted the invitation are likely people who have a higher degree of interest in the political situation and who are open towards experimenting with new democratic practices and joining them actively. This eliminates a different group of citizens from the process, the people who are generally less interested and open to engagement. Even though it would be immensely important to include precisely these people in the process, participation is completely voluntary and this type of self-selection is hard to avoid. In case of long-term application of citizens' assemblies, more passive citizens might become interested after seeing some positive results. "The ambivalent citizen can either oscillate between poles, support compromise positions, or retract from the game altogether depending on the ambivalence-friendliness of the political system."[44]

Another important aspect is the media coverage and the involvement of the general public. The local assembly in Mostar was present in the media and it was an event that was announced and followed. The process was made transparent through the assembly website. It contains all the details on the organisation and implementation of the citizens' assembly, all the material that was used throughout the process, including the learning material,

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[44] Kalypso Nicolaïdis, "In praise of ambivalence – another Brexit story," *Journal of European Integration*, (May 2020), 10, https://kalypsonicolaidis.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Nicolaidis-In-praise-of-ambivalence-another-Brexit-story.pdf

presentations of the experts and citizens' recommendations and the names of the members of all organisational teams are also publicly visible. The topic was chosen based on the public survey in which all the citizens could recommend topics they find relevant. The citizens who did not participate were invited to send their questions, comments and ideas or request additional information at any stage of the process. This open approach sends a message that all Mostar citizens are a part of this deliberation experiment, that it is primarily their process and that they can take part in shaping it.

Conversely, the national assembly was much less visible in the media and the information accessible to the citizens were scarce. In contrast to Mostar, there was no possibility for them to get more directly involved. The website of the assembly contains only the basic information and the citizens' recommendations, without any details on its planning and application. Due to this lack of participation from a wider community, national assembly was limited in scope and effect. Engaging the citizens that are not directly participating, familiarising them with the process and making it transparent increases their trust and support. This is especially meaningful when it comes to discussing the implementation of recommendations and potential institutionalisation of assemblies. Merkel and others underline that, for the legitimacy of the process and the recommendations, it is important that there is high public accessibility. "It seems crucial to solicit media attention, organize exchanges with the public, and publicize justifications for why elected representatives either did or did not take up the suggestions made by citizens' assemblies."[45] Mostar is a good case to learn from when it comes to getting the wider public interested and engaged with the process.

Government involvement in the process also increases the chances of success. The local government in Mostar was involved in the creation of the citizens' assembly and actively participated as members of organising teams. When they support the process from the beginning and take active part in it, the government officials are likely to be more open towards actually considering the recommendations and implementing them. This was the case in Mostar, where another citizens' assembly is in preparation. The national citizens' assembly was very different in this aspect. Although there was some participation of the representatives of political parties and government institutions, it was on a low level and no additional

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[45] Merkel, Milačić and Schäfer, *Citizens' Assemblies: New Ways to Democratize Democracy*, 10.

interest was shown from their side to support the assembly or take into account the suggestions of the citizens. According to Stojanović, such assemblies are not of interest to the political institutions and they may even be perceived as an attack on their authority. For many politicians, the only democratic tool are the elections and they see no purpose in implementing citizens' assemblies.[46] To prevent the government representatives from viewing citizens' assemblies as directed against them and their jurisdiction, it is a strategically good step to make them a part of the implementation process.

The government support closely relates to the question of the topics discussed in the citizens' assemblies. The citizens in Mostar discussed cleanliness of the city and maintenance of the public areas, which is not a politically sensitive topic and does not cause polarisation in the government structures. Thus, the government had no reason of that kind to oppose the recommendations, as long as they represented a viable solution to the problem. Focusing on practical matters that directly affect people's lives is more effective in transitional societies in which the citizens are still adjusting to their roles in democratic decision-making.

The national assembly tackled politically very controversial topics, ones that cause major disagreements and tensions in the state government. The fact that the citizens found solutions to the issues of constitutional and electoral reforms in a short period of time shows that the government could have done the same a long time ago if there was enough political will, openness to compromise and honest intentions.

The outcomes of both assemblies were successful in terms of the involvement of the citizens who participated. In both cases they participated actively, showed interest in learning more about the topics they were dealing with and coming up with effective solutions. They took their roles seriously and approached the process with responsibility, readiness for constructive dialogue and openness towards different opinions and compromises. In comparison to the political debates and decision-making, the citizens portrayed more flexibility and understanding and fresh perspectives untainted with political games and corruption. Their approach produces faster results since there were no self-interests involved, aside from the benefits of solving the issues at hand, that would blur their judgement and that are present in political structures. Stojanović underlines the difference in decision-making

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[46] Stojanović, interview.

among citizens versus parliamentarians by saying that participants of citizens' assemblies are not elected for a longer mandate, but only for a short time period. On contrary, the members of the parliaments strive to be re-elected and tend to think short-term from the fear that unpopular decisions will not be received well.[47] It is this difference in perspectives that allows citizens to think out of the box and that leads parliamentarians to keep playing it safe and avoid drastic changes. In the process of finding common solutions, the citizens have nothing to lose, but a lot to gain.

Although this might indicate that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are ready for a democratic shift in the political system and for an active role in decision-making, it is reasonable to question whether the people who participated truly mirror the situation in the country. If the citizens were in fact ready, wouldn't that have reflected on the election results so far? Ever since the end of the war, for 30 years now, the same political parties and the same politicians have been holding the highest governmental functions. The citizens that do not participate in elections claim that they have nobody to vote for and refuse to give their vote to the lesser evil. It can be assumed that precisely those citizens are the ones that crave a more active participation.

While a stronger initiative from the citizens is still needed, these two citizens' assemblies did show that the chosen participants were able to successfully handle the challenge before them. Implementing citizens' assemblies on a regular basis could be a good way to gradually include more citizens and adjust them to taking a higher role in the decision-making process. This especially applies to the assemblies that deal with more manageable problems that the people face every day in their local communities, as they are more likely to interest the citizens and less likely to cause counter effects with the government.

Both citizens' assemblies have shown that reconciliation is not a precondition for a healthy democracy. Moreover, they indicated that active democratic engagement can encourage inter-ethnic cooperation of citizens and contribute to reconciliation in the long term. During the local assembly in Mostar, a city that has been suffering the consequences of deep ethnic divisions, no tensions were reported and the citizens successfully worked together and treated each other with respect and understanding. The national citizens assembly was under even

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[47] Nenad Stojanović, "Citizens' assemblies are an answer to populism," Interview, *Bürgerrat*, September 3, 2021, https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/citizens-assemblies-are-an-answer-to-populism/

more risk of ethnic tensions as the topics discussed were controversial and sensitive, but the participants showed maturity in their discussions and came up with solutions that help prevent stagnations caused by ethnic divisions. They suggested the removal of the House of the Peoples, the part of the Parliamentary Assembly that is in charge of ensuring ethnic equality and that often causes deadlocks in implementation of important reforms, as well as adding a fourth member of the Presidency that would represent minorities.[48] The example of Northern Ireland adds to the conclusion that even the citizens in divided societies can work together on solving common problems and achieving shared interests. Organising similar democratic processes regularly can be a step towards strengthening collaboration between citizens of different ethnic groups and help in overcoming the past conflict.

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[48] "Preporuke skupštine građana BiH, [Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly of B&H]."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Two citizens' assemblies in Bosnia and Herzegovina produced different results, but had one element in common. They both highlighted the potential among the citizens to take a more prominent role in the decision-making system and in shaping the future of the country. The analysis shows that a significant part of the population is ready for taking part in change-making and that this perception is likely to expand to others as well once they see the results of citizens' engagement in their communities. The results of both plenums and citizens' assemblies showed that there is a fertile ground for experimenting with this type of deliberative democracy.

There are many different ways of structuring citizens' assemblies, so it is important to choose the model that works best for the given country and its people. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it would be beneficial to implement citizens' assemblies in local communities on topics that are more familiar to the public and related to their everyday lives. This approach increases the likelihood of the recommendations being adopted by the government and, at the same time, builds a more democratic system gradually, which allows time for the citizens and the government to adapt to it. The citizens' democratic engagement and their interest in the decision-making would increase, they would cooperate without ethnic barriers and feel that their opinions matter after seeing their suggestions come to life. When that kind of environment is created, organising national assemblies on more complex and ground-breaking topics would be more sustainable and the citizens would be more likely to strongly advocate for the implementation of their joint recommendations.

In the light of reconciliation, citizens' assemblies in Bosnia and Herzegovina can contribute to the process of overcoming the past conflict and building healthier relations among ethnic groups. The examination of the two assemblies has demonstrated that reconciliation and democratic development can take place simultaneously and encourage one another. Dialogue is an essential element of successful reconciliation and is it the integral ingredient of citizens' assemblies. The design of assemblies is such that it fosters respect and open-mindedness. During the process, people find that they share a lot of the same problems and work as a team to solve them, which sparks trust and understanding. The citizens are likely to become less susceptible to the government's rhetoric of divisions once they have a hand in the decision-making and experience positive changes in their surroundings.

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