

Serbia

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Introduction

The main obstacle for any type of democracy in Serbia, including local democracy, stems from the concentration of political power and control in the hands of the ruling conservative coalition, which can be characterised as populist and autocratic. This affects all areas of the country and all levels of government. This coalition, led by the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka or SNS), has governed the country since 2012. Possibilities for local democracy to flourish are few unless there is significant change at all levels, particularly change of the national government itself. The last section of this chapter outlines some of the limited possibilities that exist for supporting local democracy.

Serbian society has long been marked by significant economic and social disparities between its centre and the peripheral areas. Employment and educational opportunities are mainly found in the capital city Belgrade, and to a degree in the northern, nominally autonomous province of Vojvodina, which has traditionally been more developed and prosperous than the rest of Serbia.²

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

This report is part of a publication series that investigates local democracy in the 19 countries where the ICLD municipal partnership programme operates.

This report covers events up to 31 May 2019. Events occurring after this period are not considered.

Many politicians and private individuals in Vojvodina are dissatisfied with the extent of the province's autonomy and see it as continuously obstructed by the central government. Vojvodina's local autonomy was somewhat re-established after the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2001, but has come under threat again after the rise of the SNS-led coalition. In 2013, as a result of an ongoing dispute between the province Vojvodina and the central government, the province's parliament passed a declaration to defend its constitutional rights and autonomy. The centre-left, which at that time was governing the province, supported provincial autonomy, while the central government saw further decentralisation as a threat (Bohnet and Parramore 2013).

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² This commentary cannot take into account the situation in the other, former autonomous province Kosovo, which Serbia still considers a part of its territory; Serbia has no control over de facto independent Kosovo, although it wields a strong influence over a few Serb-dominated enclaves.

The south of Serbia is the poorest and most deprived region in the country. The ‘brain-drain’ from these areas to Belgrade, and from the whole of Serbia to destinations abroad, due to poverty and the lack of jobs is another significant barrier to local democracy flourishing. The departure of many young and educated people leaves room for ruling party constellations to govern unchallenged, particularly in less developed areas. This decreases the social and intellectual potential for progressive change not only in those regions, but in the country as a whole.

General country analysis

Political power in the majority of municipalities is firmly concentrated in the ruling coalition, headed by the SNS, the largest and most powerful party in Serbia. The SNS is a populist, conservative party that traces its origins to the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party, whose former members founded the SNS in 2008. Loyal members of the coalition dominate the positions of power in both central and local governments. SNS members control many employment opportunities, especially in the most economically depressed areas of the country. Getting work in the state sector, for example in education, the judicial system, municipal offices, is highly dependent on party membership, in particular for high-level positions. The country is considered to be deeply divided into two camps, popularly known as the ‘two Serbias’ (see Omaljev 2016) – supporters of the ruling government and those who strongly oppose it. The opposition is not unified and includes a wide spectrum of ideological positions. Progressive, pro-European orientations are present, but often scattered and isolated. Most power and influence in Serbia is in the hands of one person, Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia and its former prime minister. The current Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, is considered loyal to and controlled by Vučić;

surprisingly for many observers both in Serbia and abroad, she is internationally educated and openly lesbian.

In principle, the Serbian political system is based on the principle of the separation of authority between the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The National Assembly has legislative authority. Its members are elected directly usually every four years, through a proportional representation system. Citizens vote for electoral lists, and parliamentary seats are distributed in accordance with the number of votes the lists receive. The Government of the Republic of Serbia, including the prime minister and the ministers appointed by him/her, has executive authority. The president of the Republic of Serbia in theory does not answer to the assembly, but to all of the citizens in the republic, who directly elect the president every five years. Judicial authority consists of the Constitutional Court, chosen by the National Assembly, the regular courts and the prosecution. All three branches of authority are in reality controlled by the same elite and thus the separation of powers is only nominal.

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia states that Serbia is a ‘state of the Serbian people and all its citizens, based on the rule of law and social justice, the principles of civil democracy, human and minority rights and freedoms, and commitment to European principles and values’ (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia 2006). The very short and vague Article 12 of the Constitution states that the power of the state is limited by the citizens’ right to provincial autonomy and local self-government, but that this right is limited by constitutional and legal frameworks.

Fiscal decentralisation

The municipality is the lowest level unit of local self-government. The means from which the entire system is financed, including the units of local self-government, come from taxes and other legally defined types of public income (Bećirović 2012). The municipalities and towns are largely dependent on the transferred funds controlled by the state government; as such, they are not in any way fiscally autonomous, thus making them highly dependent on central government (ibid.; Stojanović 2014).

Political decentralisation

In the local elections, held every four years, citizens vote but it is not really they who decide the local government. The ruling coalition formed at the state level is typically mirrored in local coalition formations (Stojanović 2014). The representatives of these local assemblies are elected by a proportional system with one elective unit and a 5 percent threshold. As a consequence of this system, coalitions are essential, as it is rare for one party to garner enough votes to form a local government on their own (ibid.). These coalitions tend to be dominated by the parties that are most powerful at national level, and which exert direct and autocratic influence over their local branches. Mayors are elected by the local assembly, and are in fact responsible to the assembly and not to the citizens, which further obstructs democratic processes. Local governments in Serbia, due to their economic dependence on the national government and the fact that the big national parties control local coalitions, cannot operate without the interference of the national government.

Conclusion: possibilities and barriers for municipal partnerships

Despite the grim picture painted here of the current state of Serbian democracy, there is a strong desire within a large segment of the population, especially among young, educated people, to change things and fight for democracy and the rule of law, both nationally and locally. This can be seen in the widespread anti-government protests that have been unfolding all over Serbia over the past two years. These pro-democratic segments, whether individuals or groups, present a strong potential for change. Finding ways to empower capable, cooperative individuals and groups who stand outside the government structures in various small municipalities would do much more for local democracy and decentralisation than cooperation with the often corrupt and nepotistic structures of power, which are only nominally pro-European. Local ombudspersons and councils for inter-ethnic relations that form in multi-ethnic municipalities present additional possible partners for empowering local democratisation. Another viable partner is an organisation called LDA, a centre for local democracy, which is part of a European network coordinated from Strasbourg. This organisation has offices in two geographically peripheral Serbian towns, Subotica and Knjaževac. Municipalities where the democratic opposition parties have managed to form a local government could also be targeted for municipal partnerships.

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Legislation

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