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**INDEPENDENT EVALUATION REPORT**

*Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue Project – PHASE III*

*(2020-2023)*

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**ACRONYMS**

BFPE Foundation BFPE for Responsible Society

CSO Civil Society Organisations

EC European Commission

EU European Union

GONGOS Government-organized non-governmental organization

GoS Government of Serbia

GOPAC Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption

IPU Inter-Parliamentary Union

LA Local Assemblies

LSG Local Self-Government

LTI Local Transparency Index

MCS Mobile Committee Sessions

MP Member of Parliament

NARS National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia

NCEU National Convent on the European Union

ODIHR Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OECD-DAC Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-

Development Assistance Committee

OSCE Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

PH Public Hearings

RoP Rules of Procedure

SDC Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

SCO Swiss Cooperation Office

SDG Swiss Development Goals

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

WPN Women Parliamentary Network

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since 2012, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been supporting parliamentary and participatory democracy in Serbia through the *'Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue Project`* (the Project hereafter).In 2020, the Projecthas entered its third and last phase (2020-2023).

An independent external evaluation of the Project’s third phase was conducted between October and November 2023 by a tandem team of one national and one international consultant. Guided by a series of targeted questions linked to the OECD-DAC criteria, the evaluation was tasked to place a particular focus on relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability but also on how digitalisation and good governance principles of participation, transparency, accountability, gender responsiveness and social inclusion were addressed. The following report summarises the evaluation’s key findings.

The evaluators found the Project to be contextually relevant. The project`s support aligned well with Serbia`s aspirations yet somewhat a rocky road to its full-fledged EU membership. Negotiation Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) in Serbia`s Accession process which focuses on democratic governance has been one of its more contentious areas. Thus the project`s three-pronged design, internal coherence and its breadth were well targeted by i) working with the national Parliamentand its select committees to cultivate a deliberative, transparent and participatory culture, ii) down streaming the same at the level of local assemblies (LA) who tend to be systemically and politically side-lined while iii) reinforcing civic engagement through the empowerment of civil society organisations (CSO) and citizens.

The project also aligned well with Serbia`s efforts to implement the UN Agenda 2030, particularly with respect to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 relating to *peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice* *for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions* at all levels.

Partnering with UNDP, indirectly with OSCE and well-chosen local partners – National Parliament`s Committees on Finance and Agriculture, 35 Local Assemblies, Transparency International – Serbia (TS), Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence Foundation for a Responsible Society (BFPE) and Standing Conference on Town and Municipalities (SCTM) contributed to the project`s sound coherence. It has been one of very few donor projects that simultaneously supported both national and local-level representative bodies. Hence the switch to support local assemblies in the Project`s second phase and their continued support in its last phase is also viewed positively by the evaluators.

Under Outcome 1, the added activities of promoting vertical inter-governmental (national-local) collaboration through public hearings and innovative mobile committee sessions cultivated sustained support for deliberative processes in policy making. Though the practice still needs to be fully institutionalised with built in safeguards to ensure substantive rather than tokenistic civic inputs, the inter-governmental connectivity is recommended to continue. This will foment inter-governmental relationship building, better vertical information and knowledge sharing, mutual accountability hence bolstering the *practice* of collaborative governance between national and local levels of government.

Within the parliament, though a commendable momentum of thematic inter-parliamentary caucuses such as Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) and the Women`s Parliamentary Network was built up in the Project`s first two phases, in its third phase, due to the intense political polarisation cross-party of dialogue and work within the caucuses unfortunately halted. The project`s activities thus had to be partially redirected toward the local level. Here principles of adaptive management were appropriately utilised but when it came to strengthening the quality of deliberative practices and cross-party consensus building within NARS` parliamentary committees, the project showed limited results.

Support for digital tools as a means of reinforcing transparency, accountability and participation at both national and local level was another pronounced feature of the project. These efforts aligned well with Serbia`s pro-active national digitalisation policy but were met with notable challenges and several lessons learned in practice.

Although a relatively small area within the Project, support for ombudspersons aptly filled in an important systemic gap. Despite the project coming to an end, a request was made for Switzerland to continue diplomatically supporting the cause of institutionalizing the role of Serbian Ombudspersons in practice.

Where the project could have done more or potentially differently is in relation to Outcome 3.Efforts to incentivise and embed a more pro-active and substantive CSOs` and citizens` engagement in policy-making both at local and national levels was met with mixed results. Here, closer accompaniement, more tailored use of support measures and facilitation techniques by e.g. experienced local CSOs that were well within the project`s reach and scope was needed. Adoption of a `learning by doing` approach where representatives, CSOs and citizens are brought together to pragmatically resolve problems of common interest or on more narrowly defined common themes could have been more impactful. Hence, the project perhaps paid a disproportionate amount of attention tending to the implementation of digital tools and embedding mechanical, legislative procedures which most legislatures (including at local level) already had in place or could manage on their own, than to the qualitative dimensions of democratic processes it aimed to enrich and bolster.

This being said, the project`s Phase III did not have an easy ride. It commendably navigated in a challenging and hyper sensitive political environment. Despite its qualms and tribulations, throughout its three phases, the project managed to pave small but consistent stepping stones by setting precedents for democratic values and procedures within Serbia`s representative bodies. With new technologies permeating parliamentary bodies` realities, especially after the COVID 19 pandemic, it was faced new challenges. While the project`s digitalisation efforts strengthened parliamentary bodies` transparency, lessons learned from its implementation of digital solutions should be pro-actively applied in similar future project designs. Among the key takeaways would be i) close oversight and monitoring of vendors/contractors when developing ICT solutions, ii) effective contract management between the latter, project and end users, with iii) careful management of handover to ensure satisfactory provisions for the maintenance and aftercare of ICT solutions once the project has ended. In tandem, ensuring that ICT solutions are sufficiently complemented by `human touch` and qualitative processes is equally important. This means, when introducing software or ICT solutions the technical support provided should equal the amount of time, resources and technical assistance spent on sensitisation and training about the effective use of the digital solutions in practice. This does not mean merely to disseminate user manuals. Rather, new technologies should be purposefully embedded within the systems and among people that they intend to serve.

1. **OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION** 
   1. **Objectives and Project Background**

Switzerland has been a long-standing partner of Serbia since 1991. Cultivation of strong democratic and good governance principles has been the cornerstone of continued Swiss support and programming in Serbia. To this effect, since 2012, Switzerland has been implementing a multi-phase *'Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue Project`* managed by UNDP and Serbian counterparts. Following the completion of two successful phases 2012-2015 and 2016-2019, the Project`s last Phase III 2020-2023 will be completed in December 2023. This report shares the findings from an external review of this exit phase.

Building on the achievements of its previous phases, Phase III continued to focus on the strengthening of representative bodies and civil society at national and local level. At national level, working in a particularly challenging political context, it was to facilitate cross-party dialogue by involving parliamentary caucuses and committees, while strengthening transparency, citizen participation and gender equality within assemblies and civil society at local level. Reinforcing the efficacy of these processes, digital tools also featured strongly in the project. More concretely, the Project`s three outcomes for Phase III included:

**Outcome 1:** The existing levels of dialogue on pre-selected topics and inclusive citizen-centred policy making in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (NARS) are increased, and the space for CSOs participation is preserved and strengthened.

**Outcome 2:** Local assemblies are transparent in providing information to citizens and civil society, and empowered to better serve their democratic role and respond to citizens’ needs.

**Outcome 3:** Citizens and civil society organisations, especially women, engage more actively with parliaments at the central and local levels as the conveners of inclusive dialogue and by providing inputs to law- and policy making.

Due to deteriorating context in 2021 caused by the opposition boycott and following a mid-term workshop with the advisory board members to adapt the project to evolving and new circumstances, the project was to adopt an adaptive programme management modality, to be able to better respond to contextual challenges. The Theory of Change and Outcome 1 were subsequently revised by reducing the Project`s activities related to the NARS. This availed more resources to be pragmatically shifted to the local level – Outcomes 2 focused on local assemblies (LA) and – Outcome 3 working with civil society and citizens at central and local level. Operationally this resulted in enhanced engagement with LA while support to local ombudsman as independent government bodies was added.

Phase III of the Projectwas implemented under two different *Swiss Cooperation Programmes for Serbia* [(2018-2021)](https://www.kingzollinger.ch/fileadmin/pdf/Swiss_Cooperation_Strategy-2018-2021.pdf) and the [current one (2022-2025)](https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/serbia/en/home/international-cooperation/strategy.html)[[1]](#footnote-1). In both cases, the project aligned well with the Programmes` governance domain and its overarching priorities that principally aimed to `*contribute to efficient and effective democratic institutions and processes as well as to inclusive and sustainable growth by supporting Serbia’s reforms and path to European integration for the benefit of all citizens*.

Consequently, both programs placed a continuous emphasis on supporting enhanced capacity of local authorities, particularly local assemblies; transparent, participatory and accountable national institutions; and empowered civil society in its oversight role. Here too, the Project`s design with its three outcomes was well aligned and relevant. In its strengthening of representative institutions both at national and local level the Project synergized well with Switzerland`s and Serbia`s support for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – namely SDG Goal 2016 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions and the Agenda 2030. Sustaining and developing strong democratic institutions equally forms a part of Serbia`s path toward European integration.

**1.2 The Evaluation Process & Methodology**

Conducted in October-November 2023 by a local and an international consultant, the evaluation was tasked to assess the achievements and lessons learnt derived from the Project`s Phase III as well as to draw overall conclusions on the project`s progress since 2012.

In the review, the external evaluators were guided by a series of targeted questions linked to the OECD-DAC criteria, with a particular focus on relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. How effectively the Project applied good governance principles of participation, transparency, accountability, gender responsiveness, social inclusion but also digitalisation was to be also assessed.

The evaluation comprised of three consecutive phases:

1. a *preparatory online kick-off phase* which involved setting of expectations with SCO Serbia followed by an in-depth desk review,
2. a *data collection & consultative phase* that included a 5-day field mission from 23-27 October 2023 in Serbia during which primary qualitative data were collected through 17 semi-structured interviews with the UNDP implementing team, regional, national Parliamentand municipal counterparts, non-governmental organisations and Swiss Cooperation Office in Serbia. Site visits to 3 municipalities – Nis, Novi Sad and Leskovac were conducted while 2 interviews with municipal representatives from Kraljevo and Cacak were conducted online. During the qualitative data collection, mindful attention was paid to the inclusion of gender balanced voices.

iii) a *data aggregation and analysis phase* that assessed the collected data to derive the conclusive findings for the review. Here the evaluation team used a fit-for-purpose contribution analysis[[2]](#footnote-2), process tracing, actor attribution and thorough validation of the project`s achievements as per the programme` logical framework and the six mentioned OECD-DAC criteria for evaluating development projects.

It is to be noted that the findings were limited to the desktop review of documents provided by the implementing team, SCO Serbia, evaluators` own research and the mission interviews.

1. **CONTEXT SETTING** 
   1. **Political Context during Phase III**

The project “Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue” was implemented during challenging times in Serbia. The period was marked by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and a series of electoral winds: the parliamentary, regional and local elections held in June 2020, parliamentary and presidential elections in April 2022. Staunch political polarisation that has nearly reached a point of political paralysis has been also shadowing the implementation period of Phase III. More recently, the Parliament was dissolved again in November 2023 by the President of Serbia with new snap elections called for December 2023.

This political backdrop significantly influenced the project by reducing the available time for implementation of activities. At the same time, the Government of Serbia (GoS) has continued to declare accession to the European Union (EU) as a strategic goal for the country. Despite this, the accession process has slowed down with no new clusters being opened since 2021, including cluster 1 which incorporates accession political criteria and democratic development. During the implementation period, the state of democracy in Serbia has remained volatile.

The principle of the division of powers was not adequately ensured, and was seriously challenged in practice, with the predominance of the executive both in the Parliament and in the judiciary. Generally, the work of the Parliament is most often curbed by the Government[[3]](#footnote-3) and the oversight role of the Parliament is not satisfactory and substantial in practice. The proportional electoral system with a closed list enables the practice that a significant number of geographic areas and municipalities do not have an elect MP from the region. It also prevents the formation of electoral and accountability linkages between the elected MPs and citizens. Belgrade based CSO, CESID, reported that 60% of the citizens find this form of an electoral system problematic as they do not vote for candidates but for the party leaders. The political parties then appoint the MPs, which undermines the trust in the parliament.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The political party scene shows predominance of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) with its coalition partners Socialist Party of Serbia and a few smaller ones, whereas the opposition is fragmented, divided in two programmatic lanes, one often referred to as “pro-European” and the other one as “patriotic”. The Code of Conduct and sanctioning of the parliamentarians for the breach of parliamentary conduct is unequally applied targeting mostly the MPs from the opposition.

In early March 2020 the outbreak of Covid19 led the GoS to proclaim a state of emergency on March 15. The fact that the decision on introducing the state of emergency was done without the confirmation of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (NARS), was largely criticized by the opposition and the academia as a breach of Constitution. The health situation and the regulations issued by the Government imposing limitations on movement and in person meetings disabled the organization of activities previewed by the project until early 2021 when the vaccination process started. At the same time these limitations pushed for the search for alternative digital solutions for online meetings.

**2020 Elections and Parliament work:** In February 2020, the electoral law was modified by decreasing the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% and by increasing the percentage of women on both local and parliamentary candidates` lists from 33% to 40%. At first scheduled for 26 April, the elections were postponed and the electoral campaign was put on hold due to the Covid19. The opposition announced the boycott of the elections, arguing that the general political and sanitary situation, with rising polarization and lack of media freedom, prevent the elections to be free and fair. The elections were held in June 2020 and resulted in a supermajority of seats (188 of 250 seats) won by the Serbian Progressive party (SNS). Two other lists passed the 3% threshold (Socialist party of Serbia and SPAS that merged with the SNS) as well as three ethnic minority lists. With no relevant opposition, the NARS was practically one-party Parliament in this convocation, with 140 MPs who were elected for the first time to the parliament. The work of the 2020 Parliament was rather efficient with reduced urgent procedure (265 laws from August 2020 were adopted until February 2022 when it was dissolved after 16 months), but due to the absence of viable opposition, there was no substantial parliamentary debate. As CRTA established, “70 percent of the adopted laws were adopted without amendments and 40 percent of the committee sittings lasted less than 10 minutes”.

**The informal groups,** established in previous convocations, such as Women Parliamentary Network, restarted their work but the very nature of the cross-party dialogue groups was questionable due to the absence of a viable opposition in the Parliament and risked to be used for political gains of the ruling majority only.

In autumn 2020, the President, contrary to the constitutionally determined competence, announced that the mandate of this convocation will be shortened and snap elections were to be held in April 2022. Consequently, the Parliament was dissolved on 15 February 2022. The following processes and events marked the work of this legislature:

* **Inter-party dialogue:** With aim to bring back the political debate to an institutional framework, the pressure of the domestic political actors, civil society and academia, as well as concerns of international actors[[5]](#footnote-5) about the democratic nature of the present Parliament[[6]](#footnote-6), led to the establishment, in April 2021, of the inter-party dialogue which was supported by the European Parliament (EP). The high political polarisation was evident as the inter-party dialogue divided into two lanes - one held with support of the European Parliament and the second without the EP support. The inter-party dialogue resulted in the modification of election laws adopted at the end of 2021 which addressed some of the ODIHR recommendations.
* **Process of Constitutional changes** related to the judiciary independence took place during 2020 and 2021 with 11 public hearings held. The final text of amendments was adopted by NARS in November 2021 and the referendum for the confirmation of constitutional changes was held in January 2022.
* **Adoption of the Code of Conduct:** The Parliament adopted the Code of Conduct in December 2020, after a process that was marked by the opposition and CSOs as non-participatory and the content was criticised.

**Snap elections were held in April 2022, the new Parliament was constituted in August 2022 with new leadership.** As a result of the presidential elections, Aleksandar Vucic was re-elected. New Government was formed in October 2022 though practically, the new Parliament did not work since its dissolution in February 2022, i.e. 8 months of inactivity. This time the opposition participated at the parliamentary elections and a more pluralistic Parliament appeared.[[7]](#footnote-7) Out of 250 MPs, 95 women were elected (38%), three out of six deputy speakers were women, but only four out twenty committees` chairs were women. The practice of smear campaigns and hate speech continued in the parliamentary debates and the polarisation transcends the NARS, spreading into other areas, particularly media. Collaborative government is defunct and, according to many, Parliament is becoming less open and less inclusive with no functional cross-party groups. The misuse of the Rules of Procedure is common: the last agenda for the session on the budget for 2024 had 60 laws grouped in one item of the agenda, budget being the first one. The Rules of Procedures need to be modernised and aligned with the EU standards and practice in order to ensure the proper fulfilment of parliamentary functions. The NARS has not adopted any annual work plan so far which disables both the MPs and all others to plan debates and provide timely inputs.

**Local governments show even more limited separation of powers than government at the central level.** LA`s autonomy from the executive branch is hard to achieve given the lack of adequate legal framework and resources. Adoption of amendments to the Law on Local Self-Government in 2018 were the first to define participatory and oversight methods for LA. During the modification process of the Law, three out of eight amendments proposed within the Project were adopted, including on public hearings and participation, while offering the new Project a path for proliferation of these tools by amending the Rules of Procedure[[8]](#footnote-8). This includes an explicit mandate to consult citizens on draft laws and annual local budgets. In provincial and local elections in 2020 the opposition parties boycotted the local elections, but some of the local opposition leaders/activists participated as “citizens` groups” and some were elected, which allowed for the preservation of a multi-party nature of LAs. Similarly, as for NARS, when asked to which extent citizens trust local authorities, 30% of citizens responded that they totally distrust them, and 27% that they tend not to trust.[[9]](#footnote-9) In autumn 2023 a number of LAs were dissolved prior to the end of their mandate. This shortened the time for the planned project activities, except for those related to equipment purchase and software development.

**Civil society in Serbia is mature and competent to monitor the ongoing reforms** and consolidation of democracy in Serbia. They can do so individually and/or through umbrella organisations (National Convention on the EU gathers nearly 700 CSOs). Through established networks such as The Society Wide Platform Sustainable Development for All[[10]](#footnote-10), the CSOs can monitor work of the Government and the Parliament. At local level, CSOs are mainly small organisations without regular and sufficient funding. A worrisome trend on the rise are organisations that promote undemocratic values, usually acting on behalf of political parties – also known as government-organized non-governmental organisations (GONGOs). During the Project`s Phase III, there were two waves of massive citizens` protests. The first one in late 2021 referring to the adoption of the Law on Expropriation and its potential impact on investments hampering the environment and the second one took place in months following the tragic mass shootings in May 2023. The attitude of the government and the Parliament towards civil society is two-fold. On the one hand, CSOs are subject to smear campaigns and verbal attacks in government and in parliament. On the other, the framework for cooperation between the government and civil society improved over the last couple of years. However, cooperation with civil society is neither systematic nor fully effective.

Key political and social issues during the last Phase related to the ongoing Covid19 crisis. In 2021 environment issues referring to prospects of foreign investments of Rio Tinto in the western part of the country gained significant importance. In 2023 Kosovo remained high on the list of key issues following the Brussels and Ohrid Action plan on normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Key topics provoking public debate included fight against violence in various its forms in Serbia, corruption, public spending, and human rights, particularly LGBTs rights, among others.

1. **EVALUATION FINDINGS**
   1. **Relevance**

Relevance was assessed by looking at the Project`s alignment with the current national priorities, with the needs of the target groups, the appropriateness of its design and its responsiveness over time. The reviewers were also asked to reflect on: *1) How has the project used the available space for democratic practice at local assembly level in an effective way? 2) Have LAs used mechanisms promoted by the Project, such as for example public hearings or mobile committee sessions? 3) Is there a record of non-state actors (incl. citizen, CSOs, academia) being included in the work of LAs? 4. Did the third phase of the project take a sufficiently strategic approach in responding to the deteriorating political situation? How relevant were the adaptations made to the project in 2021?*

**By design the Project aligned well with the needs, policies and political priorities of Serbia.** Overall, the evaluatorsassessed the project`s design and targeted outcomes as relevant. Firstly, its activities align well with Serbia`s aspirations and qualifying pre-accession processes to become a full-fledged member of the EU. Democratic development is a priority area in the EU integration process, placed within Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) and within political criteria. The project also harmonised with the objectives of the *Strategy for Public Administration Reform* (2021-2030) - June 2021, *Programme for Reform of the Local Government System 2021-2025*, Serbia`s commitments to the *Open Government Partnership* (since 2012)[[11]](#footnote-11), and with the Prime Minister`s strong E-government and digitalisation of public sector agenda.

Secondly, the Project **(Outcome 1)** responded fittingly to the findings and concerns of the European Commission`s 2019 Report on Serbia which established that “*the ruling coalition’s parliamentary practices led to a deterioration in legislative debate and scrutiny, and significantly undermined the parliament’s oversight of the executive. There is an urgent need to create space for genuine cross-party debate and conditions for the opposition to participate meaningfully in the parliament*.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Though the GoS publicly declares its respect for the Parliament`s independence from the executive, in practice, this is often not the case. Instead, the GoS has shown that it rather *dictates* the work of the Parliament by allowing only short time for deliberation of draft bills, and in one case even by returning the already adopted laws back to the Parliament for repeated voting, among other standard practices. Responsively, the project thus aimed to cultivate Parliamentary oversight, to strengthen its compliance with the Rules of Procedures and to sustain its committees` deliberative functions.

By design, the strengthening of democratic processes in the Parliament through cross-party and citizen-centred dialogue through committees, public hearings (PH), mobile committee sessions (MCS), cross-party caucuses (CPC), and informal groups in the NARS was thus pertinent. PH and mobile committee sessions, although incorporated in the Rules of Procedures (RoP) for more than a decade, have not been frequently used as tools for deliberation and mutual dialogue. Cross-party caucuses - Women Parliamentary Network, GOPAC, SDG, Green Parliamentary Group - developed in the project`s earlier phases and seen as a success story, also continued in Phase III.

Accountability and enhancement of NARS' parliamentary oversight role was to be achieved through enhanced digitalization and development of the budget oversight portal. It was to be accompanied by analysis and participatory deliberations on the budget, draft laws and reports. This responded to MPs` need to be better informed about government`s spending, better capable to analyse the complexities of budgetary oversight as well as to explain and open the latter to citizens and to other actors so that they are not only better informed but also so that they can also engage and provide their inputs in the legislative process.

**Well targeted partnerships with high impact committees.** Committees on Finance, Environmental Protection and on Economy were an important asset to the Project. So were the project`s partnerships with experienced and credible Belgrade-based CSOs - BFPE and Transparency Serbia (TS). They facilitated contributions to the cross-party discussions and to the drafting of public policy documents on topics high on the reform agenda such as the environment, gender, anti-corruption, SDGs and digitisation. The project`s overall contextual fit was confirmed by NARS` continuity as a project partner with a cost-sharing agreement. At the same time, NARS` pro-active commitment to the project and visible impact thereof was limited during Phase III. Despite the external contextual factors (Covid19 and elections) NARS did not adequately expand the inclusion of various stakeholders, particularly civil society and experts in the project`s events and activities that aimed to increase the space for and quality of policy dialogue.

Thirdly, the project was unique in that it is one of few that simultaneously worked with the national Parliament and local assemblies (LA). Working closely with LAs **(Outcome 2)**, an intervention modality that was introduced mid-second phase, was applicable as it responded to the need for LA`s greater transparency, increased visibility and enhanced linkages between locally elected representatives and citizens. Close linkages between MPs and citizens are limited in a proportional representation electoral system that favours parties` rather than individual MPs` representational role. Moreover, LAs and their efforts to evolve local self-governance is traditionally side-lined in Serbia since the priority is typically given to the executive of the local government.

The project thus addressed the limited division of local powers, the need to empower LAs in their functions while strengthening the relationship and accountability between LAs, CSOs and citizens. In 2019 Local Transparency Index (LTI) established that the lack of transparency decreases possibilities to hold LGs accountable and that transparency is often being considered as an additional burden for LGs, while cooperation with citizens is low. The LTI established that “LA session agendas are not published in two thirds of LSGs, while voting results and amendments submitted are available in less than 10% of cases. City/municipality council decisions are available in 11% of LSGs, and those of LAs are available in slightly more than 20%.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

So, the Project`s support for 35 LAs selected on the basis of the LTI made very good sense. The key interventions included building up e-Parliament and local ombudspersons complemented with capacity building of LAs` staff, establishing a network of LA secretaries and enhancing LAs` linkages with their constituencies. The project also coincided with the ongoing local self-government reforms as per changes in the Law on Self-Government adopted in 2018 which incorporated public hearings as a deliberation tool to be applied by LAs.

**Relevance of Outcome 3** was based on the need for civil society to engage in dialogue with representative institutions and to hold them to account, particularly in a context where viable Parliamentary opposition is weak. Recommendations of the Project`s Peer Review Report from March 2019 were accounted for in addressing the shrinking of the space for political dialogue[[14]](#footnote-14) as well as the concerns listed by the 2020 EC report which stated that the relationship between the government and CSOs is marked by fragmented cooperation, inadequate space granted to CSOs during public consultations, and that CSOs` inputs on draft laws were not given sufficient consideration and follow-up”. It further reiterated that “the inclusiveness and transparency of the reform process, in particular on issues related to EU accession, need to be improved as a matter of priority and public consultations on policies and legislation need to be more substantive.” The amendments to the Law on state administration, Law on local self-government and the Law on the planning system thus introduced specific provisions aimed at improving public participation in policy development.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Furthermore, Outcome 3 contributed to the implementation of the revised Action Plan for Chapter 23 of the EU accession negotiations (2020) which previews the expanded consultation process between the Government and civil society[[16]](#footnote-16).

**Design of the project and relevance over time**. Through its three phases, the project`s longer-term orientation and presence thus related well to the complexity of ongoing reforms and Serbia`s pro-democratic aspirations to become a full-fledged member of the democratic EU family.

* 1. **Coherence**

*The Project`s coherence was evaluated by looking internally - at the synergies and interlinkages the Project built on within SDC`s and UNDP`s projects/programmes, and externally – its coherence vis-à-vis other development actors working in Serbia. A*spects of complementarity, harmonisation and co-ordination with others, and the extent to which the Project added value while avoiding duplication of effort were looked at.

*Internal coherence***.** Within SDC Serbia`s portfolio of activities, the Project falls under Portfolio Outcome 1 of the *Swiss Cooperation Programme for Serbia 2022-2025*: *Democratic governance and civil society which envisages citizens and civil society to actively participate in inclusive democratic processes and institutions are more accountable and effective*. More specifically, it aligns with corresponding Lines of intervention Outcome statements 1.1 and 1.3[[17]](#footnote-17). It is the only project that closely collaborates with representative institutions and complements well with other interventions in SDC`s governance portfolio. The only area where linkage is less clear and would have been more desirable is in the project`s alignment with environmental protection and climate change issues which the Programme`s Outcome statement 1.1 calls for.[[18]](#footnote-18) Internal coherence in connection to UNDP programs was more difficult to assess although the UNDP implementing team made several references to synergies drawn with its other projects such as its project on Open Data.

Moreover, there are not too many donors simultaneously working with both NARS and LAs. USAID has made announcements that it will renew its support to the national Parliament, while SIDA and OSCE have only small-scale engagements. Generally, systematic donor support for funding reforms related to the legislative branch is lacking. Hence the Project in this regard was unique, filling in a void.

**3.3 Effectiveness**

**In the context of the Project`s effectiveness, the evaluation assessed the extent to which** *the Project`s objectives have been achieved and how it has contributed to parliamentary democracy in Serbia. Of particular interest for the evaluation (per TOR) was the effectiveness of the Project`s work with informal thematic groups in the National Assembly and whether this led to visible improvements in policy making at the institutional or population level. The effect and sustainability of supported use of digital tools by the Project was also to be assessed, both at the National and local levels as was the mainstreaming of gender sensitivity to topics such as violence against women in politics and equal representation.*

**General overview of completed results.** The following Table 1 provides a quick overview of completed results requested by the evaluators from the implementation team. The Table was based on UNDP`s self-assessment in November 2023, one month prior to the project`s completion. It indicates that 25% of the project`s activities positively exceeded the planned results, 42% were fully on target, and one third (33 %) was partially completed. Based on this self-assessment, the Project has overachieved numerically on the promotion and institutionalization of public hearings within NARS, in strengthening LAs` policies, systems, tools for publishing and promoting public inputs and contributing to gender empowerment. Based on the project team`s self-assessment on the current status of results (please see Table 1), the indicator for promoting cross-party engagement was allegedly also met. So was implementation of policies and procedures by LA speakers that promote public engagement, transparency but also knowledge exchanges between LA. The project`s support for 20 ombudspersons across Serbia who were negligibly supported otherwise – some not even having office nor furniture to assume their roles and responsibilities – was commendable.

On four outputs out of the twelve planned, the project delivered only partial results. These related namely to the collaboration and publishing of legislative outputs. Holding 10 PH and consultations per year at LA level with civic inputs were also challenging and not fully completed. Evidence-based gender reviews and oversight of legislation at local level neither. Nonetheless, the disbursement on these items ranges between 88% -100%, hence suggesting that activities were undertaken and, in some cases, fully completed.

**As per these findings, the project had achieved notable results but in qualitative areas it could have done more.** As it will be further elaborated in sections below, apart from the quantitative results, qualitative dimensions, inclusive plurality and ultimately the impact of policy and deliberative processes are equally (if not more) essential building blocks of healthy and resilient democracies. Here, the evaluators find that the project`s results in Phase III were more limited. Based on their findings, the evaluators question the extent to which the project adequately attended to and ensured the deliberative *quality* of PH, MCS, cross-party mechanisms and consensus-building efforts within parliamentary committees. Apart from events being held, there is no evidence of tailored continuous trainings, dedicated facilitation, guidance or explicit quality assurance mechanisms in the design and ultimately implementation of deliberative processes undertaken by the project.The two recorded PH and MCS proceedings virtually viewed by the evaluators, albeit a small sample, showed limited interactive discourse or inputs by civil society.Thus, the project`s efforts tobolster *civic* inclusion and CSOs` empowerment to enrich the quality of democratic processes was conceivably disproportionate when considering the needs and resources at the project`s disposal. Hence in the future, it is recommended that the implementing partners pay proportionate attention to the quality as to the quantity of deliberative interventions.

**Table 1: End-of-Phase Self-Assessment by UNDP (Project Implementing Partner)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **KEY OUTPUTS PHASE III: STATUS OF COMPLETION OVERVIEW (October 2023)** | | | | |
| **Status** | **Output** | **Targeted** | **Completion rate** | **Disbursed** |
| *EXCEEDED COMPLETION* | 1.1 | 20 PH, with 33% input by citizens/CSOs. | 31 PH so far, with 25% of time allocated for input by citizens/CSO | 92% |
| 2.1 | 10 LAs have systems, policies, and tools to publish information and promote public input. | 21 | *91%* |
| 3.3 | 30% of leadership posts within elected assemblies are held by women. | 50% of NARS deputy speakers, 20% committee chairs, and 20% speakers in local assemblies. | *100%* |
| *ON TARGET & FULLY COMPLETED* | 1.4 | 20 formal and informal opportunities (annually) for cross-party engagement promoted compromise/ consensus based policy- making with impact on inclusive development. | 20 engagements in 2023 with CSOs’ participation & opinion-exchange among participants | *100%* |
| 2.3 | 15 LA speakers actively and efficiently support establishing policies and procedures that effectively promote public engagement and transparency. | 15 speakers | *100%* |
| 2.4 | Sustainable formal and/or informal mechanisms for LA`s networking, facilitating events for knowledge exchange. | Completed (3 meetings of the SCTM Network of LA`s Secretaries) | *100%* |
| 2.5 | 20 local ombudspersons actively working on oversight over local executives and enhancing citizens’ rights. | 20 | *100%* |
| 3.1 | 5 forums for political dialogue organized by 2023 between civil society, elected NARS; Las & other stakeholders. | 5 local forums in 2023: 2 local forums in 2021, 1 in 2022, and 5 in 2023. | *100%* |
| *PARTIALLY COMPLETED* | 1.2 | 50% NARS publications (draft laws, budget) published & accessible. | Less than 5% of draft legislation adopted under the urgent procedure. | *91%* |
| 1.3 | Amendments to legislative framework implemented to promote transparency and public participation. | `Partial` | 100% |
| 2.2 | 10 PH/consultations per year per LA with a (%) of time allocated for inputs by citizens/ CSOs that reflect citizen concerns per supported LA. | 85% of LAs organized at least 1 public debate per year. | 88% |
| 3.2 | 5 draft law reviews, oversight inquiries based on evidence-based gender impact assessments conducted as a part of a routine review of draft laws or oversight inquiries by 2023. | Partially – Law on Gender Equality and gender budgeting at the local level, without routine overview of draft laws. | 90% |

\* Source: UNDP self-assessment

**SUMMARY OF KEY RESULTS AND WHAT WORKED WELL OVERALL**

**Partnering with well reputed and trusted partners.** All of the Project’s implementing partners - UNDP, TS, the Standing Conference on Towns and Municipalities, and BFPE Foundation for Responsible Society were well chosen, reputable, trusted and well received by national and local partners. This added to the positive reputation and ease of implementation in a contentious and politically risk-prone context.

**Relevant project design.** The three-tracks of activities focused at National Parliament, at Local Assemblies and CSOs were mutually reinforcing and enabled the project to have a level of agility by not putting all of its eggs in one (risky) basket.

**Project`s enduring engagement, flexibility and adherence to adaptive management.** Despite the many elections, disruptive flow, growing polarisation withing politically acrimonious political sphere the project tried ways to adapt and continue. Following the recommendations made in the 2019 peer review, the Project aptly internalised an adaptive management approach. In doing so, it continued to shift its focus from national to local level activities which proved to be a sensible move. It enabled continuity in its activities despite the narrowing down of conducive political spaces at national level. Despite the qualms and tribulations, the project managed to pave small but consistent stepping stones to consolidating and sustaining democratic processes to the extent possible.

**Accelerated digitalisation through e-Parliament contributed to increased transparency** **particularly within local assemblies but also at national level**. LA sessions became more transparent and LA`s public visibility increased via mediatised local council sessions that could now report on MPs` roll call votes in real time and share them with the greater public. The accelerated local digitalisation efforts contributed to the alignment with and down-streaming of the GoS` national digitalisation agenda. Continuous support was provided to improve NARS` website by making it more open and transparent through public dissemination of timely information about Parliament’s plenary sessions, committee work and other activities. Live streaming of committees and other meetings in the Parliament added new dynamism within NARS and provided more information to citizens hence addressing their low trust in parliament`s work. Serbia`s gradual improvement on the UN E-participation index attests to the success of its efforts to progressively modernize and digitalize its public institutions. Advancements in digital Parliament factor highly in the way that UN E-participation index final scoring is compiled. Hence any contributions here directly translate into Serbia`s higher scoring.

Moreover, more in-depth support was provided through the Open Budget Portal for transparent monitoring of public spending. Initial software development for the Portal`s version started in August 2015. This first version functioned until `*software changes on the input side occurred, preventing access to the Treasury Department database during Phase III. The project (in collaboration with the* Committee on Finance and the Treasury) *subsequently began working on the software update in 2023 with the completion of technical work in December 2023.* This means thatthe MPs could start using the updated version only at the legislative sessions in 2024.[[19]](#footnote-19)

At the time of the evaluation as the Open Budget portal was in the process of being adjusted to comply with NARS’ RoP, it was unavailable for the evaluators` review. Details about the usage of the portal, however, have not been resolved yet or at least not disclosed to the evaluators. Who will be authorised to use it - committee chair/s, MPs in the Finance Committee alone, party whips, others? How will the issuance of MPs authorizations work? Although a working group was created with the aim to complete the adjustments, it is advised that the access and usage aspects are resolved within the scope and before the end of Phase III.

At local level, LAs also seek to modernise their work by introducing e-voting and e-Parliament systems to achieve more efficiency in their work and more visibility in the community. Also, the project offered support for e-parliament, but similarly to the central level and the budget portal, attitudes among LAs in regard to maintenance of the e-Parliament once it is developed are not uniform - there was great support in Nis[[20]](#footnote-20), while obstacles were imposed in Pancevo and the Vojvodina Regional Assembly, as reported by the UNDP periodic reports.

**Mobile committee sessions enhanced the vertical inter-governmental relations and communication** which over time contribute to mutual relationship building and improved cooperation. While this mostly occurred along party lines, supporting the national-local government vector still positively sets a precedent for collaborative governance, mutual networking and awareness about each other`s activities.

**LA`s visibility and potentially confidence grew.** Though a qualitative reading gained by the evaluators during their mission, LAs interviewed expressed genuine `pride` and openness to collaborate with Switzerland and UNDP. Moreover, it appreared that they did not collaborate with many international donor partners hence the partnership was all the more prized and appreciated.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**UNDP and SDC`s prompt operational responsiveness** **to arising issues and collaboration** with local and national partners was appreciated among the stakeholders interviewed.

**Supporting Ombudsmen and women addressed an important gap but it is in its nascency.** Collaboration and the project’s support for ombudspersons[[22]](#footnote-22) was formalised in 2016 while the actual project implementation started in 2022. In addition to SDC/UNDP, OSCE also supports the strengthening of ombudspersons in their functions. Overall, there are 175 LGs, but only 24 ombudspersons, 151 do not have legal statute or a mandate since LGs under current law have voluntary choice to have ombudspersons or not. This results in a significant variation of awareness and actual support for ombudspersons across LGs. Thus, given this low support for ombudspersons, the project aptly targeted to address this gap. Through a peer-to-peer approach, for one year, the project supported a group of established ombudspersons to tour and raise awareness about the role and competence of ombudspersons in all LGs that do not have them. The Project supported the travel expenses, several joint meetings among ombudspersons and bought equipment – printers, zoom equipment for some of them. Yet there no precise record was provided to the evaluators of how many citizens were served and number of requests that were resolved by the ombudsmen`s offices supported hence the evaluators could not assess the impact factor.

*Before the project, we (ombudsmen and women) are too scattered, we want to talk to each other, we don`t know each other and we need to be heard. With the support of OSCE and UNDP – we could go to* *the media, so that people know that we exist and to lift our image.*

Ex-ombudswoman, Novi Sad

**AREAS THAT WORKED LESS WELL OR WITH LIMITED EVIDENCE**

**Technical and ICT support vs. not-so impactful use of participatory instruments.** In connection to Outcomes 1 and 3 the project was to employ a wide range of participatory instruments – PH, MCS and Inter-party caucuses, as well as support modalities such as peer-to-peer support, knowledge sharing and brokering, mentoring/ coaching, facilitation, participatory ICT and technical support[[23]](#footnote-23). This wide, relevant and flexible range of instruments made good sense project design-wise. However, the evaluators observe that these instruments were not adequately optimised and effectively introduced by the implementation team in practice. While the project placed significant focus on supporting the technical roll-out of e-parliament, it was seemingly less successful in its engagement of CSO, especially at the local level. On the one hand, the introduced practice of PH and mobile committee sessions was innovative and complied with the NARS` Rules of Procedure. On the other, the extent to which CSOs and citizens engaged or how they influenced policy matters being discussed could not be sufficiently traced. Thus, the numerical indicator of 33% civic inputs was intentional rather than realized in practice. Partnering with the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) on LAs networking through this project`s phase, with a LA ` secretaries` network being formed, contributed to a potentially stronger advocacy position of LAs. Still, these efforts are in their infancy and will require time, nurture, iteration and hands-on application of support in order for them to be sustainable in the future.

**Work with Parliamentary Committees and Cross-party caucuses.** Thematically, the project was to focus its work on several committees:

* Committee on Finance. State Budget and Control of Public Spending
* Committee on Agriculture. Forestry and Water Management
* Committee on Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality
* Committee on Labour, Social Issues. Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction
* Committee on the Judiciary, Public Administration and Local Self-Government
* Environmental Protection Committee
* Foreign Affairs Committee
* Health and Family Committee

Based on Project documentation and interviews held, out of the above, the Project worked primarily with NARS` Committee on Finance, State Budget and Control of Public Spending issues and with the Committee on Agriculture by organising mobile committee sessions. Apart from the fact that they were held, results and impact of these interventions, is less conclusive. According to the UNDP`s project implementation reports, not all Committees selected used the opportunity to organise PH and/or mobile committee sessions. While the convocation of PH is determined quite precisely in the NARS` Rules of Procedure, in practice, it is largely dependent on the will of the committee`s majority, hence it is subject to politicisation. No decision about holding the hearing or its topics and participants can be decided without the will of the parliamentary majority. Therefore, the project had to tread on delicate ground. It had to ensure its unbiased and politically neutral approach by preventing the UNDP from being involved in activities that could be presented as political gain of the ruling majority.

**While advancements on transparency were made, implementation of e-Parliament was not without its challenges.** As noted in the previous section, introduction of digital tools both at local and national level did bring dividends in transparency but less to in civic engagement and participatory democracy.

* **In principle, e-Parliament in LAs** was a good idea. However, the business model which the Project used to roll out e-Parliament solutions to local assemblies in practice, was not optimal. Firstly, it had problems with software testing and subsequently in dealing with software maintenance. This culminated in Vojvodina Regional Assembly with several crashes of the system during the Assembly`s proceedings and in several LAs which are continuously experiencing software malfunctions. Their question remains - *how will maintenance support be handled once the project ends?* This is a fair question that should be answered for them before the project exits. In the future, these aspects should be well stipulated in the LAs` contracts with the vendor and with the Project. The second issue worth reflecting on is the scaled business model used by UNDP to replicate and adjust or customize the software for 35 municipalities. Though well intentioned, was this really feasible, effective and efficient? The evidence presented suggests that a disproportionate amount of time was spent on handling the technical glitches and software malfunctions. This took away from engaging in soft support measures to ensure that the tools were purposefully embedded in LAs`sy. Thirdly, was adequate training, sensitization received by the clients, and who exactly received it within their teams? The evaluators had too short of a time to fully assess this.
* **Budget Oversight Portal** – The most concrete output was the Oversight Budget Portal. But as it was mentioned, it has not been fully launched nor used due to various challenges arising in its development. The Committee`s on Finance Chair interviewed and the UNDP team noted that software synergies with the State Treasury will be resolved by December 2023[[24]](#footnote-24) but the portal`s future sustainability needs to be carefully addressed. How work with the other selected committees proceeded and to what effect is also not clear to the evaluators.

**3.4 Efficiency**

**Budget overview.** For the entire duration of the project, for all three phases combined (2012-2023), the estimated Swiss/SDC budget of the partners and external contributions amounted 5'290'000 Swiss Francs. For Phase III alone, the SDC made a contribution of CHF 2`000`000 while UNDP nearly doubled it by contributing 2`000`000 of its own funds. Operational costs absorbed 84% (2 million CHF) of the total SDC contribution for Phase III, management and backstopping combined amounted to 10% (230 000 CHF) of the total while the mid-term evaluation absorbed the rest.[[25]](#footnote-25)

**Disbursement.** The evaluators requested UNDP implementation team to conduct a self-assessment on the status of disbursement. According to the latter, provided to the evaluators on 27 October 2023,[[26]](#footnote-26) the disbursement stood between 88% to 100% in different output areas. The project team expects that the entire budget will be consumed by the end of the project in December 2023. Moreover, according to the Project team, the e-Parliament related activities showed a good cost effectiveness ratio. For a Swiss investment of CHF 260'000 into five e-parliaments, an average annual saving per one e-Parliament is up to CHF 40'000 of municipal funds. UN levy for selected projects of 1 % applied. This, however, then needs to be triangulated with the solutions` impact and operational effectiveness.

**Steering and Management.** A Project Board consisting of SDC, Parliament and UNDP was in charge of steering and making overall decisions for the Project. As part of the adaptive management approach, an advisory committee consisting of project stakeholders and interested parties (international community, CSOs, other projects) met twice a year to take stock of the Project's progress and to advise the Project Board on necessary adaptations. For effective progress management, an active back stopper skilled in political economy analysis and adaptive program management to support the advisory board and the project team/SDC on adaptive management was hired.

**3.5 Impact**

To assess the project`s impact, the evaluators were tasked to focus on the role of the project in the evolution of the cross-party dialogue over the duration of the project and especially during the current phase. Would this dialogue have taken place without project`s support? At a higher level, the evaluation was to reflect on how the National Assembly evolved in terms of applying democratic practices compared to twelve years ago, particularly pointing to good practices and any setbacks that may have transpired[[27]](#footnote-27). While the impact of Phase III is assessed here the assessment will also travel across the Project`s three phases to illustrate the trajectory of the project`s overall impact, as appropriate for an exit evaluation.

**Impact of Public Hearings and the evolution of cross-party dialogue.** Since its inception the project has been promoting the cultivation of a strong participatory and deliberative culture within the National Parliament and at the local level. By design, it targeted deliberative committee sessions and public hearings (Outcome 1) as its primary instrument.A peer review conducted in 2019 also recognized that the results achieved at technical level were sound, but found that the Project needed to engage better at the strategic/political level in responding to the deteriorating political situation.[[28]](#footnote-28) It advised for a more strategic and political approach by ensuring more space for cross-party dialogue in the Parliament in line with democratic practice and by enhancing transparency in the Parliament’s work hence better oversight.

Throughout the project`s duration a series of public hearings on diverse topics were organised at both levels. Parliamentary committees may organize PH for the purpose of:

`*Obtaining information, or professional opinions on proposed acts which are in the parliamentary procedure, clarification of certain provisions from an existing or proposed act, clarification of issues of importance for preparing the proposals of acts or other issues within the competences of the committee, as well as for the purpose of monitoring the implementation and application of legislation, i.e., realisation of the oversight function of the National Assembly, as regulated by the National Assembly Rules of Procedure.` [[29]](#footnote-29)*

In Phase III alone, 31 PH were held in different NARS` committees and local, which exceeded the originally planned 20 for the phase. In other phases the numbers were also sizeable. Public`s appreciation of PH has been allegedly also positive where PH were seen to *`motivate citizens’ participation and build up more respectful relationships between citizens and MPs/NA. A public perception survey showed that while NA plenary sessions still produced mostly negative reactions, public hearings produced mainly positive sentiments. `[[30]](#footnote-30)*

Hence when it comes to the *sustainability* of PH as a legislatively set and institutionalised practice in a hypersensitive political context where polyvocality is limited, the project has done well. By design the project complied with IPU`s criteria for democratic parliaments by promoting the participation of diverse groups in parliamentary processes (IPU Indicators 6.1 - 6.3)[[31]](#footnote-31). A level of transparency on PH was also reached through NARS` disclosure of all PH held on its [official website](http://www.parlament.gov.rs/info-board/public-hearings.3371.html). Future improvement, however, should also include the publishing of discussions or the full public streaming of PH proceedings which is currently not available. Despite the possibility of PH being politicised and with a tendency of being overused in donor projects, a concern that has been aired by some stakeholders[[32]](#footnote-32), PH have become a widely accepted instrument for political deliberation in the Parliament.

On the other hand, when looking at their quality in promoting and improving of cross-party dialogue and civic input, the results were more limited. Due to NARS` polarisation and the worsening of contextual political conditions during the Project`s third phase, GOPAC, Women Parliamentary Network or the Green Group, where cross-party dialogue was previously possible, ceased to function altogether in 2020. This made it difficult to hold any substantive cross-party deliberations and to work on any joint initiatives. Moreover, according to the Project’s Logframe, the PH were expected to foment participatory and civic engagement culture - measured by *having at least 33% of time for public input by the National Assembly committees and informal groups*. Both methodologically and in practice, this goal, was challenging to realise. While the evaluators saw two publicly available recordings of mobile committee sessions (on YouTube), evidence of documented PH logs was not available. Hence, without evidence, it was challenging to establish the impact of PH regarding their participatory value such as the level (%) of public and CSOs` input, the types of CSOs that participated and the effect of their participation.

**Outcome 2. Digitalisation improved transparency and internal efficiency of national and local assemblies but less so their openness to and practice of civic engagement.** The Project spent a significant number of resources and effort supporting the digitalisation of national and local assemblies. As Parliaments around the world are rapidly modernising and digitising their internal infrastructure, procedures and practices, the project`s focus on digitalisation of national and local assemblies is in line with good international parliamentary practice[[33]](#footnote-33). In this regard, though the project endured several implementation challenges, the standardised e-Parliament approach did contribute to making procedural voting within LAs more efficient and transparent. Visible transparency gains included the publishing of LA meeting dates, procedures and content of the meetings. Added transparency was also gained through media presence who were not only invited to attend LAs` meetings but who could stream and report on the voting procedures and on LAs` voting results in real time. Importantly, the live coverage of LAs` proceedings enabled citizens and the greater public to follow what is going on inside the LA chamber. This is a significant change from the closed sessions and non-transparent processes before the software was introduced.

**Impact related to Outcome 3.** As it was established, theproject relevantly targeted the strengthening of civil society at both national and local level. It also partnered with reputable national CSOs in its implementation. Engaging citizens and CSOs in the work of parliamentary committees and in cross-party caucuses was highly relevant since the actual electoral system does not provide for links between MPs and citizens. The project, in its design also addressed the shrinking space for dialogue with civil society and in countering smear campaigns and verbal attacks on CSOs and civic activists taking place in the Parliament.

Yet, the evaluators did not see evidence of the project`s activities having a lasting impact on civic engagement of CSO, especially women, engaging more actively with parliaments at the central and local level and in their proactive provision of inputs to law and policy making. At both levels, the PH or MCS convened by the project tended to be rather singular events. These may be warranted in some situations. But when it comes to building CSOs` *capacity*, ensuring CSOs` impact on policy or decision-making processes, and efforts to build a collaborative culture between formal authorities and civil society, continuous, committed and deliberative processes are needed. These comprise multiple meetings, facilitated, iterative and continuous interventions over longer periods of time. Here, it is unclear how the project`s different coaching and facilitation instruments were applied in practice. More direct coaching and applied training of LAs on how to work with CSOs constructively is also needed. Working with hands-on learning-by-doing approaches on concrete issues of common interest – e.g. nexus between climate change and environmental protection, could have been perhaps more impactful. While the project had a few focal areas, support seemingly remained at a higher level, supporting `Rules of Procedure` rather than expanding collaborative governance in practice. This being said, the thorough approach based on several interlinked activities used by Foundation BFPE in Lucani was an example of good practice that could have been replicated further. Empowering a peer-to-peer approach of more established, national CSO working closely with local level CSO and LAs could be one avenue of strengthening democratic processes and capacity locally.

* 1. **Sustainability**

In assessing whether the benefits of the project will last or continue over the medium and long term, several elements have been taken into consideration - financial, economic and social aspects.

**Outcome 1.** The project`s outputs related to this outcome have limited sustainability due to its dependency on power relations in the Parliament, but also on Serbia`s overall readiness to fulfil EU accession political criteria and requirements for democratic reforms. Some of the projects' outputs will be sustainable in the medium and long term. If the Budget Portal`s software is adjusted to the software of the Treasury by the end of 2023 and its usage becomes regulated by the Rules of Procedure so that the majority and the opposition can use it, this tool will show its sustainability over time as a tool that provides parliamentary oversight of the public spending. The limitations to the usage of the Portal, however, may be imposed by the majority in the Parliament. The practice of live streaming of parliamentary committees and public hearings is sustainable in the long run. Public hearings and mobile committee sessions, as previewed by the Rules of Procedure, will be used after the project`s end, if the existing financial sources in the NARS budgets are allocated to this. At present, the funds are ensured but are not used as there is no regulation on how to allocate the funds to different committees and other parliamentary bodies. This question may be regulated by the rules of procedures and by the NARS` annual work plan. Cross-party fora may become sustainable if there is a more balanced ratio between the majority and the opposition in the Parliament in which case the results from the initial phases of the project with the WPN, Green Group, SDGs forum and others may be used as a new starting point for improved collaborative practice.

In 2023, the year of the project`s end, the EC reports that “the effectiveness, autonomy and transparency of the Parliament, and the role of the parliamentary opposition, need to be strengthened to ensure the exercise of necessary checks and balances'' with detailed description of problems reiterating that the “debates were marked by tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition, that there was no follow-up to a citizens’ initiative, nor to an opposition motion for interpellation”. EC finds that “the code of conduct was not systematically applied and there was frequent use of inflammatory language, which went unaddressed. Parliamentary Rules of Procedure need to be modernised, and the code of conduct applied to penalise offences by parliamentarians.” These EC findings pave the way for further donors` programs for the legislative branch in spite of the sensitivity of the task and the risk of incoherent approach of the politically dominating actors.

Regarding the prospects of linking the sustainability with the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 and achievement of SDGs, NARS has not yet adopted the umbrella document in the form of a declaration or legislatively backed resolution, announced in 2017. According to the Europe Sustainable Development Report 2022 (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2022) and concerning specifically the SDG 16, the report states that there are significant challenges in achieving this goal, while in terms of progress it is pointed out that the Republic of Serbia is stagnating.

**Outcome 2.** The sustainability of the outputs is limited and, in several areas, even low. The e-voting systems introduced in the LAs are up and running but with several LAs still requiring software adaptation (to LAs` various rules of procedure). The question then remains to which extent local political actors will promote and use the new tools after the project is finished. Introduced e-parliaments equipment and software (e.g. the LA of the City of Nis) were well received and implemented. The new or modified rules of procedures supported by the project and related to public hearings in LAs will be sustainable although ongoing adaptations may be needed in the future. The internal policies/documents on fight against corruption, facilitated by the project partner Transparency Serbia (TS), will be applied if the majority within LAs and the local executive branch will find it recommendable. The Agency for Prevention of Corruption reported in its annual report for 2022 that “from 2017 to the end of 2022, a total of 26 out of 145 LGUs adopted LAPs and formed bodies to monitor their implementation, mostly in accordance with the Agency Model”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

There are sustainability prospects for the Network of LA secretaries established by the SCTM within the project. Yet continued funding for SCTM`s activities will be needed in the future since the LA Network is among the youngest SCTM networks without a steady funding stream. As for LAs` visibility and sustainability of their participatory culture (holding public debates, public hearings and mobile committee sessions) will mainly depend on the priorities of LG`s leadership and willingness to expand linkages with their constituencies. Future advancement in LA`s capacity to perform their duties will depend on their empowerment through the continued modification of the Law on Local Self-Government. For example, granting of their own staff which according to the last legal changes in 2018, was merged with the executive branch administration. Limited or lack of IT staff in LAs and/or but also staff within the executive branch might jeopardize the application of new software and the training of newly elected LA members. The forthcoming local elections, with one part of cities/municipalities to be elected in December 2023 and the other in spring 2024, will impact the sustainability of the projects` outputs with the new power relations that will be forged after the elections.

**Outcome 3.** Outputs related to Outcome 3 have limited sustainability. As for Outcome 1 and 2, sustainability will depend on power relations and general democratic transformation efforts in Serbia. Reforms related to gender equality have advanced in the last three years with the adoption of the new Strategy and the new Law on Gender Equality which provide for greater representation of women in decision making processes. It would be reasonable to expect that the good practice of the Women Parliamentary Network (WPN) and local women networks in LAs established in previous phases of the project will be continued and advanced. CSOs will continue to convene inclusive dialogue with NARS and MPs, through the existing networks (particularly NCEU), but this is not necessarily attributable to this project. At local level, except for some cities such as Uzice (inclusive dialogue established) or Becej (citizens` chair established), the project could have exerted more efforts to safeguard sustainability by building up CSOs` local capacity. Instead, the project was limited to holding `one-of` or a few locally organized events without continuity as it was well demonstrated by the series of fruitful public debates and workshops in Lucani conducted by BFPE. To gain participatory traction, deliberative and capacity building initiatives require time, continuity, skilled facilitation and tailored topical sensitisation of citizens, civic actors and LGs. These initiatives need to build on each other over time. The evaluation team thus holds that more robust and sustainable empowerment of local CSO could have been built up over the course of the project, as it was initially intended. Synergies, knowledge and skills transfer between central and local level CSO and other UNDP projects working at local level (e.g. on sustainable local development plans and Partners Fora obliged by the Law on Planning system) could have been better leveraged. As a result of such efforts, greater sustainability could have been achieved.

* 1. **GESI and Good Governance as Transversal Themes**

Where possible throughout its three Phases, the Project was expected to support networks and facilitate opportunities for elected women to exchange knowledge and experiences and fulfil their leadership roles within selected assemblies. The Project assisted in the creation of the Women Parliamentary Network (WPN) in 2013. The support logic was to gather all Serbian female MPs in NARS as well as female municipal councillors and entrepreneurs to initiate legislation, exchange knowledge and advocate on gender equality and women's issues. Given the dynamism of the WPN in previous phases, in Phase III, within Outcome 1 - engagement of the Network in a cross-party dialogue continued to be supported. Outcome 3 also had a strong gender and social inclusion dimension where women and citizens were to actively engage in an inclusive dialogue with parliaments at the central and local level.

**In design and by building on achievements from previous phases, the Project`s Phase III transversally addressed women`s issues.** When it comes to the achievement of envisioned activities and impact, according to the implementing partner, these were *partially* achieved. On the one hand, the targeted 30% of leadership posts within elected assemblies to be held by women was superseded by actual 50% of NARS deputy speakers, 20% committee chairs, and 20% speakers in LA being female. Within Outcome 3, in partnership with the Foundation BFPE the Project organized a series of effective workshops on diverse gender related topics in smaller municipalities. Combining knowledge sharing, dialogue and trust building among CSOs but also working with local councils to develop Local Action Plans for Gender Equality, the BFPE workshops provide an excellent example of peer-to-peer civil society-to-civil society empowerment where smaller scale activities at community level can go a long way. This practice should be further encouraged, and it could have been replicated within the project on other topics such as ecology, agriculture or urban development. More extensive work with the Women Parliamentary Network, however, was limited as the Network ceased to function in 2020 due to the polarisation dynamics. In Outcome 3, the practice of reviewing draft laws and oversight inquiries based on evidence-based gender impact assessments at local level were attempted but did not result in the development of routine overviews of draft laws in practice. This being said, the adoption of a new Law on Gender Equality, in 2021 was a major achievement in codifying the protection of women`s rights in Serbian law, with long-term high impact. Yet, it is not clear whether this achievement is attributable to the Project, likely not.

1. **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Project had achieved notable results. In some Outputs, it even exceeded its original benchmarks. Achieving these in a progressively deteriorating and challenging political space was commendable. Prudent navigation was needed. Unfortunately, in some cases, it was at the expense of targeted advancements in implementation.

When it came to civic engagement, the project and the implementing partner could have done more in applying different methodologies and instruments, and in training and working with local CSOs. More, by directly empowering well established national CSOs to work in a peer-to-peer coaching modality with local CSOs. Though partly this was attempted, the interventions remained ‘one of events’ rather than systematic, continuous efforts to strengthen civil society and civic engagement at national and local level. Sensitising, training and pro-actively engaging LA representatives on qualitative, rather than merely procedural processes would have been equally value adding. Identifying small hands-on projects on common topics/ issue areas of high interest to both sides, where learning by doing methods could have been used to achieve joint results would have been perhaps a more suitable modality.

Although Phase III of the project is shortly coming to an end and not much residual action nor longer-term corrective measures can be taken, the evaluators identified several recommendations and lessons learned as future food for thought. These are addressed at the local counterparts who will be taking over the project`s activities and at SDC. The recommendations presented are also topics that could be jointly discussed by SDC with other national and other development partners.

**RECOMMENDATION #1: Enhance (future) support for Parliamentary Service Departments** **both at national and local level.** Parliamentary Services, when working well, provide important support functions to the MPs and to Parliamentary committees. This is especially in Parliamentary systems where MPs have sparse budgets for hiring research assistants and staff. In Serbia, at national and even more so at the local level, the latter is the case. Therefore, in future related programming whether by SDC or other development partners, needs based technical support for Parliamentary services is paramount and should be encouraged. Stakeholders interviewed during the evaluation vehemently agreed that Parliamentary Services both at national and local level in Serbia need to be significantly technically strengthened, not necessarily in size but rather in their efficacy and professionalism.

**Recommendation #2: Follow up on the Parliamentary Services Review.** In fourth quarter of 2023, NARS completed a robust review of Parliamentary Services . If not done already, it would be opportune for SDC to obtain and review this report from NARS. Moreover, as a follow up and potentially with UNDP, it could be opportune to hold a policy dialogue among development partners or with NARS and local assemblies (e.g. via SCTM) on the key takeaways and an actionable way forward for effectively supporting the Parliamentary service within NARS but also those at local level.

**RECOMMENDATION #3: Follow up on the sustainability of the Open Budget Portal**. Work on digital tools such as the Open Budget Portal should be always accompanied by adequate training. This does not mean only training the technical staff who will be implementing the Portal-related software but also the Committee Members, MPs and their assistants who will be eventually using the Portal in their work. In-person orientations, webinars or podcasted training modules should be also extended to civil society and the greater public. Launching the Portal is not interesting and good value for money if it will be unused. Enabling people to understand the Portal and its functionalities is key to its functional success.

**RECOMMENDATION #4: Closer follow up needed in the Vojvodina case.** As already mentioned, the Vojvodina Regional Assembly requested an extension of the project by 3-4 months in order to complete fixing of residual bugs in the e-Parliament software. They requested more on-site presence by the vendor/ service provider PROZONE and/or a second opinion, mini audit to be provided by an independent ICT expert/company about the quality of existing software and potential provision of alternative solutions on how to fix the existing issues. Simply, follow up is needed to seek mutual (Vojvodina-UNDP-SDC) solution on how to solve the situation effectively and expediently. Otherwise, the program`s reputational risk may be at stake.

**RECOMMENDATION #5: Continued support for SCTM`s Local Assemblies Secretaries` network.** The Network of LA Secretaries is among the youngest among SCTM`s networks. It was formally established in 2019. In terms of sustainability, although only a few events were organised, the SCTM is lobbying its Secretary General to keep the network running but it is still not sure how. Possible means to support the continuity of SCTM`s Local Assemblies Secretaries` network could be discussed by SDC and other donor partners.

**RECOMMENDATION #6:** **Continued diplomatic support and advocacy is needed to amend the Law on Ombudsman,** making the local Office of Ombudsman mandatory. While the Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government is allegedly quite supportive, diplomatic support of the Swiss (and other donors`) government would be appreciated.

**RECOMMENDATION #7:** **It would be opportune to capitalise on knowledge products and impact stories** such as the qualitatively rich methodology and series of public hearings on gender equality topics organised by the BFPE Foundation, in 2023, in Lucani. The example shows that in a highly charged political space, dialogue and the organisation of PH is still possible if the right facilitation methods are used such as peer-to-peer coaching of civil society by more mature civil society organisations active and knowledgeable about the targeted topics.

**Lessons Learned**

**Digitalisation.** UNDP drafted a useful lessons learned document titled *Developing and implementing the e-Parliament software solution* derived from their experience of working with and implementing digital projects at local level during Phase III*.* Some highlights include i) *plan for longer and gradual phase-out*, ii) *digital is best done iteratively, starting with fundamental needs* rather than attempting to offer a “full” solution from the start, and iii) *the technical is also political*, especially in highly sensitive and polarisation charged contexts. These lessons are valuable for future projects involving the integration of technologies, especially in political settings and institutions. To be added, similar governance projects with digital components also need to do a careful balancing act in their design as digital solutions need to be effectively contextualised. Moreover, they need to closely and meaningfully cater to the qualitative processes within which they are embedded and to the users they serve. The latter typically require a fair bit of sensitisation and upskilling before and after the digital solutions are introduced. Contractual management of vendors and aftercare solutions are also not to be underestimated and need to be effectively woven into the project design.

**When it comes to civic engagement,** a series of reinforcing rather than 'one-of' events, the right use of facilitation and *accompaniement* methods is needed. Depending on the facilitation quality, PH facilitation training for those leading PH is value adding. Holding a PH alone without it being meaningfully targeted and methodologically tailored does not bring positive democratic and civic engagement dividends by default.

**To be impactful, PH and MCS should be purposefully chosen and closely adapted to NARS` and LA`s mutual interests**. Future definition of programming priorities and relevant PH, MCS topics should be done during the project`s inception phase while also being consistently revisited throughout the project`s lifecycle with the active involvement of LA deputies and CSO. Provision of CSO`s and other actors` inputs to Parliamentary oversight and deliberative proceedings need to be enhanced through more pro-active relationship and networking, including within cross-party caucuses. To foster meaningful dialogue, trust and cooperation between the government and civic actors is a longer-term, dynamic and attentively curated effort. Topics of mutual interest and small joint activities where learning by doing and results can be jointly achieved, need to be strategically chosen and attended to through close accompaniement. One-of events are less impactful in this context. The same applies for engaging civil society and citizens in deliberative policy processes with impact on the legislative branch.

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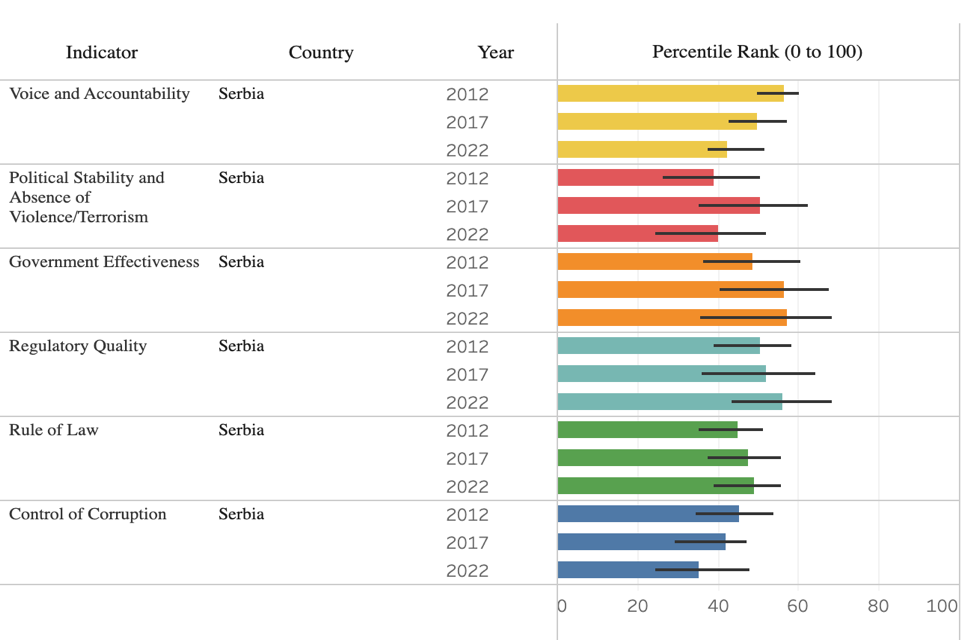
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| **ANNEX 1. LIST OF CONDUCTED INTERVIEWS**   |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Interlocutor | Organisation/contact | Relation to project | Method | Date | | 1. Sanda Babic | EU Delegation in Serbia, Political Officer | EU / donor | Interview | 23/10/ 2023 | | 2. Boban Džunić | President of the City Assembly of Nis, | Beneficiary | Interview | 24/10/ 2023 | | 3. Zoran Vukašinović | Secretary, City Assembly of Leskovac | Beneficiary | Interview | 24/10/ 2023 | | 4. Sandra Stojković | Secretary General, Assembly of The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina | Beneficiary | Interview | 25/10/ 2023 | | 5. Marko Radin | Secretary of the Assembly City Assembly of Novi Sad | Beneficiary | Interview | 25/10/ 2023 | | 6. Marina Popov Ivetić | Former President, Association of Ombudsmen of Serbia | Beneficiary | Interview | 25/10/ 2023 | | 7. Sonja Licht | Director, Foundation BFPE for Responsible Society | Partner | Interview | 25/10/ 2023 | | 8. Veroljub Arsić, MP | Chair of the Committee on Finance, NARS | Beneficiary | Interview | 26/10/ 2023 | | 9. Dario Kukolj | Head of IT Department (Assistant to the Secretary General), National Program Director, NARS | Beneficiary | Interview | 26/10/ 2023 | | 10.Marijan Risticevic | Chair of the Committee on Agriculture NARS | Beneficiary | Interview | 26/10/ 2023 | | 11. Novak, Gajić  Maja Stojanović Kerić | Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities SCTM | Partner | Interview | 26/10/ 2023 | | 12. Nemanja Nenadić | Program Director, Transparency International | Partner | Interview | 26/10/ 2023 | | 13.Igor Trifunovic | Speaker, The City Assembly of Cacak | Beneficiary | Interview/ online | 27/10/ 2023 | | 14.Agnes Bodens, Bogdan Urošević | OSCE |  | Interview | 27/10/ 2023 | | 15.Nenad Markovic | Former speaker of the City Assembly of Kraljevé | Beneficiary | Interview/ online | 2/11/ 2023 | | 16.SDC Serbia team | Melina PapageorgiouPetar Vasilev | Donor | Meeting | 23/10/ 2023 | | 17.UNDP project team | Nenad Gršić  Dražen Maravić  Irena Cerovic | Implementing Partner/ Donor | Meeting | 23/10/ 2023 | |

**Annex 2 - List of Global Indicators on Governance and Digital Government**

Figure 2: World Governance Indicators - Serbia 2012-2022



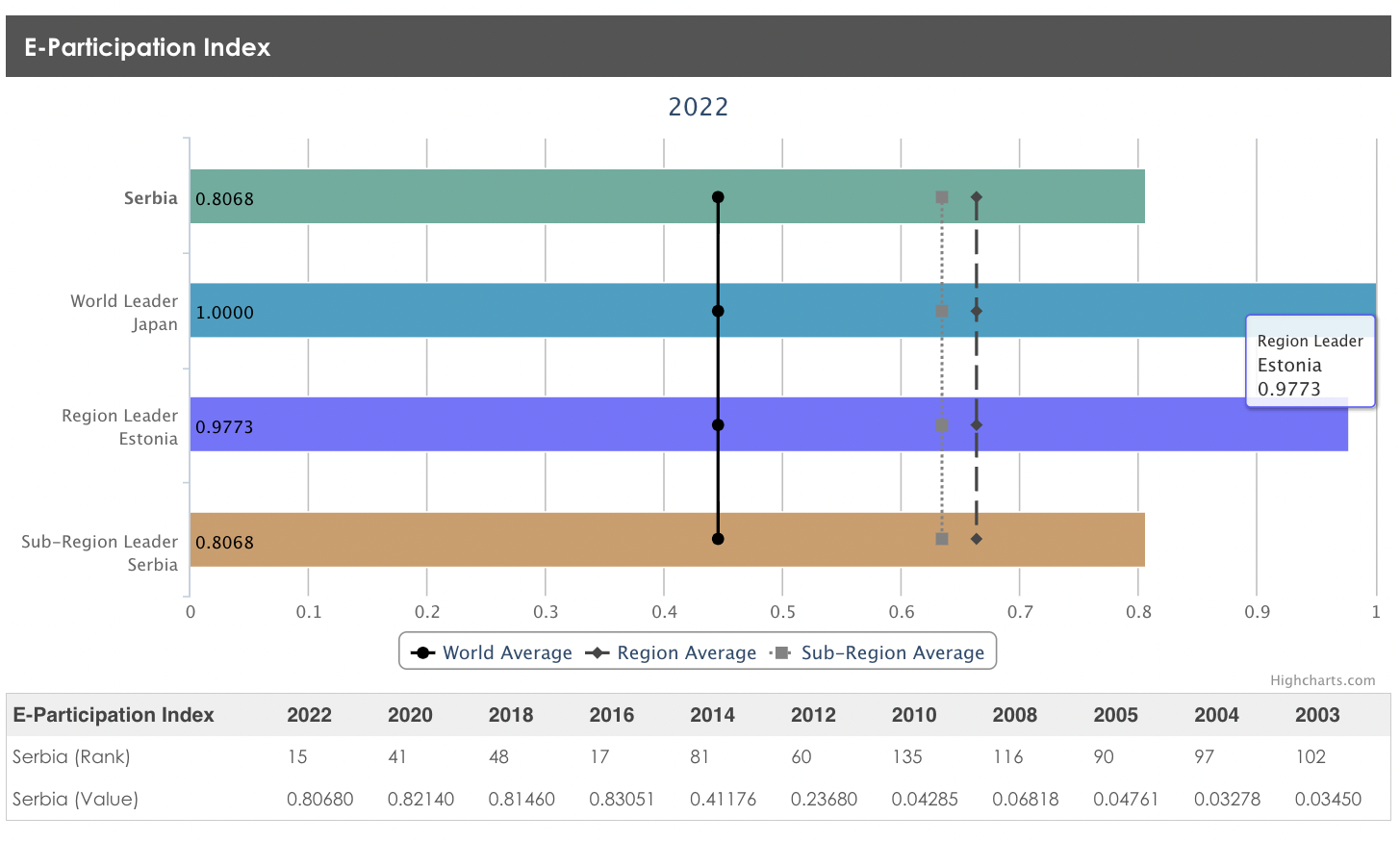
[Source: World Bank – World Governance I](https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators)ndicators

Serbia - UN E-Government Digital Index 2022

A graph with different colored bars

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Serbia - UN E-Participation Index 2022



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| **ANNEX 3 - QUICK OPERATIONAL COMPLETION & DISBURSEMENT REVIEW** | | | |
|  |  |  |  |
| PROJECT ACTIVITY | CURRENT COMPLETION RATE (either approx. %-wise or numerical value per LogFrame) | EXISTING DISBURSEMENT STATUS (delivery rates) | COMMENTS |
| **Output 1:** The existing levels of dialogue on preselected topics and inclusive citizen-centred policymaking in the National Assembly are increased, and the space for CSO's participation is preserved and strengthened. | | | |
| 1.1 | Target: 20 public hearings by 2023, with 33% of time allocated for input by citizens/CSOs. **Completion rate:** 31 public hearings so far, with 25% of time allocated for input by citizens/CSO | 92.47% | 3 public hearings in 2020, 21 public hearings in 2021, one public hearing in 2022, and 6 in 2023 |
| 1.2 | Target: 50% NARS publications (e.g., draft laws, budget data) published & accessible in a timely manner in 2023. **Completion rate:** less than 5% of draft legislation adopted under the urgent procedure (September 2023) | 90.56% | out of 149 different pieces of legislation adopted in 2023 during the January-October period, only 21 laws were adopted via urgent procedure |
| 1.3 | Target: Amendments to legislative framework implemented to promote transparency and public participation. **Completion rate:** Partially | 100.00% | Law on Referendum and People's Initiative (2021); amendments to the electoral legislation to enhance the transparency of the electoral process (2022) |
| 1.4 | Target: 20 formal and informal opportunities (annually) for cross-party engagement that promote policymaking based on compromise and/or consensus that have an impact on inclusive development. **Completion rate:** 20 engagements in 2023, with CSOs’ participation and opinion-exchange between participants | 100.00% | Public hearings and mobile committee sessions, with CSOs' participation and limited opinion exchange |
| **Output 2:** Local assemblies are transparent in providing information to citizens and civil society and empowered to better serve their democratic role and respond to citizen's needs. | | | |
| 2.1 | Target: 10 local assemblies have systems, policies, and tools in 2023 to publish information and promote public input. **Completion rate:** 21 Local assemblies have policies and tools. | 90.97% | Source: Local Assemblies' Accountability Index |
| 2.2 | Target: 10 public hearings/consultations per year per LA with a portion (in percentage) of time allocated for inputs by citizens/CSOs that reflect citizen concerns per supported local assembly. **Completion rate:** 85% of local assemblies organized at least 1 public debate per year | 88.44% | Source: Local Assemblies' Accountability Index & Local Participation Index LIPA) |
| 2.3 | Target: 15 local assembly speakers actively and efficiently supporting the establishment of policies and procedures that effectively promote public engagement and transparency. **Completion rate:** 15 speakers | 100.00% | Active participation in the project events (conferences, workshops, e-parliament) and implementation of participative mechanisms into the local RoPs |
| 2.4 | Target: Sustainable formal and/or informal mechanisms for local assemblies' networking and facilitating events suitable for knowledge exchange. **Completion rate:** Completed (three meetings of the SCTM Network of Local Assemblies' Secretaries) | 100.00% | To be continued as a sustainable mechanism after the end of the project |
| 2.5 | Target: 20 local ombudspersons actively working on oversight over local executives and enhancing citizens' rights. **Completion rate:** 20 | 100.00% | Source: Analysis of annual reports of all local ombudspersons in Serbia |
| **Output 3:** Citizens and civil society organisations, especially women, engage more actively with parliaments at the central and local level as conveners of inclusive dialogue and by providing inputs to law and policymaking. | | | |
| 3.1 | Target: 5 forums for political dialogue organized by 2023 between civil society, elected assemblies (NARS; LAs) and other stakeholders. **Completion rate:** 5 local forums in 2023 | 100.00% | two local forums in 2021, one in 2022, and five in 2023 |
| 3.2 | Target: 5 draft law reviews and/or oversight inquiries based on evidence-based gender impact assessments conducted as a part of a routine review of draft laws or oversight inquiries by 2023. **Completion rate:** Partially - Law on Gender Equality and gender budgeting at the local level, without routine overview of draft laws | 89.71% |  |
| 3.3 | Target: 30% of leadership posts within elected assemblies are held by women. **Completion rate:** 50% of NARS deputy speakers, 45% committee chairs, and 20% speakers in local assemblies. | 100,00% |  |
|  |  |  |  |

1. In the SDC, Swiss Cooperation Programmes for Serbia (2022-2025) - Switzerland will contribute to sustainable development and inclusive growth, while fostering democratic processes, in support of Serbia’s progress towards European standards and values, p.22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Contribution Analysis* refers to an approach for assessing causal questions and inferring causality in real-life program evaluations. It aims to reduce uncertainty about the contribution the intervention is making to the observed results through an increased understanding of why the observed results have occurred (or not!) and the roles played by the intervention and other internal and external factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paradigmatic is the case adoption and the immediate modification of two laws – the Law on Referendum and People` Initiative and the Law on Expropriation ration in November 2021 were adopted by the Parliament, but following the citizens` protests pressure, the Government modified the laws and required the Parliament to revoke their previous decision by adopting the new versions of the law. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-61953374> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [EU Report on Serbia 2020](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/serbia_report_2020.pdf) found that “the overwhelming majority of the ruling coalition and the absence of a viable opposition, a situation which is not conducive to political pluralism in the country”, page 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Freedom House. 2021. Nations in Transit Report.](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf.) repeated its previous score for Serbia as “transitional government of hybrid regime”. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The new allocation of seats was as it follows: 120 of 250 seats owned by SNS, 31 seats by the Socialist Party of Serbia, 38 seats for the coalition United for the Victory of Serbia, 15 seats Hope for Serbia coalition, 13 seats coalition We Must, 10 seats for Zavetnici Coalition and 10 seats for Dveri, with 13 remaining seats allocated to national minorities lists. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. UNDP, Project Document, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Balkan Barometer 2022 - PO.pdf, page 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This network is also supported by the SDC and aims to promote Agenda 2030 implementation in Serbia. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Partnership for Open Government is an international initiative aimed at providing support and greater engagement of governments around the world in order to improve the integrity, transparency, efficiency and accountability of public authorities, through building public confidence, cooperating with organizations civil society, empowerment of citizens in governance, fight against corruption, access to information, use of new technologies, all in order to achieve more effective and responsible work of public authorities. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. EC Report on Serbia 2019, page 6 available at<https://www.stat.gov.rs/media/4783/serbia-report-2019.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Republic of Serbia, [Local Transparency Index 2019](https://www.transparentnost.org.rs/images/stories/LTI2019/LTI%202019_English.pdf), page 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://crta.rs/otvorenost-zakonodavne-vlasti-u-regionu-i-srbiji-2020/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [European Commission, Report on Serbia 2020,](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-10/serbia_report_2020.pdf) p.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [Revised Action plan for Chapter 23 Judiciary and Fundamental Rights.](https://www.pars.rs/images/dokumenta/Poglavlje-23/Revised-AP23.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Swiss Cooperation Programme for Serbia for 2022-2025, p. 23 and 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [*Swiss Cooperation Programme for Serbia for 2022-2025 -* Outcome statement 1.1:](https://www.eda.admin.ch/countries/serbia/en/home/representations/embassy-in-belgrade/cooperation-office.html) Responsive and accountable institutions – Transparent and accountable local and national institutions meaningfully involve citizens in decision-making and policymaking and increase awareness, capacities regarding environmental protection and climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Exchange with Nenad Gršić, UNDP Portfolio Manager for Inclusive Political Processes, 21 December 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Interview with the LA Speaker in Nis, 24/10/2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Interview with President of the City Assembly of Nis, 24/10/2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. National Ombudsman Office in Serbia was established in 2006 after the ratification of Serbia's constitution (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. SDC Serbia, 2019. *Project Document of Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue*, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Interviews with Chair of the Committee on Finance, NARS 26/10/2023; Interview with UNDP implementation team, Head of ICT Support, 23/10/2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. SDC, 2019, Credit Proposal Document for Phase III, 18 December, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Personal communication with UNDP and status quo overview document submitted (via email), 27 October 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. SDC, Terms of Reference for the external review of “Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue`, p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. SDC, 2019, *Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue Project -* End of Phase 2 Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Serbian [National Assembly Rules of Procedure, Articles 83 and 84.](http://www.parlament.gov.rs/activities/national-assembly/working-bodies/public-hearings.3016.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. SDC, Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy and Inclusive Political Dialogue, End of Phase II Project Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [International Parliamentary Union, Criteria for Democratic Parliaments, Geneva, Switzerland.](https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/criteria-democratic-parliaments)  [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Evaluation Interview with OSCE, Belgrade, 27/10/2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. [International Parliamentary Union, 2022, World E-Parliament Report: Parliaments after the Pandemic.](https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2022-11/world-e-parliament-report-2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [Republic of Serbia`s Agency for Prevention of Corruption (APC), Annual report 2022, page 32](https://www.acas.rs/storage/page_files/Annual_Report_2022.pdf). In its report on the implementation of The Revised Action Plan For Chapter 23 – Subchapter ‘Fight Against Corruption’, it was reported that, from the beginning of April 2017, when it published the Model LAP, until 15 December 2022, a total of 111 LGUs93 adopted LAPs, or 76.55% of the 145 LGUs that are bound by this obligation (not counting the territory of Kosovo and Metohija), page 81 at https://www.acas.rs/storage/page\_files/Report\_on\_RAP23\_2022.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)