

OGNJEN KOJANIĆ

**HOW A GRASSROOTS APPROACH
TO URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE
CAN FACILITATE A JUST GREEN
TRANSITION IN THE BALKANS:
GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVED
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**

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Belgrade, 2025

Book Series SQUARE

Edited by:

Srđan Đurović, Jelena Vasiljević

Title:

How a Grassroots Approach to Urban Infrastructure Can Facilitate a Just Green Transition in the Balkans: Guidelines for Improved Citizen Participation

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Publishers:

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS
Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe

Proofreader:

Lucy Stevens

Cover design:

Nikola Stevanović

Typesetting:

Sonja Nikolić, Tijana Baltić

Place and year of publication:

Belgrade, 2025

ISBN:

978-86-6190-009-9

Replicate:

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

Production run:

50 copies



This publication was created within the Regional Fellowship Program, implemented by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, in partnership with the Regional Center for Advanced Studies of Humanities – RECAS and the Regional Network of the Centers for Advanced Studies of Southeast Europe, with the support of the Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, Erste Foundation, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

The views expressed in the text represent the views of the authors.

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Introduction: The Importance of Participation in Making the State Work

Citizens' participation in socio-political processes is a key element of a democratic society. The ability of citizens to have a say in public affairs is crucial for achieving just outcomes. Participation has been a focus of many social science disciplines: from political science, which has traditionally tracked participation in institutionalized processes such as elections, to sociology, which has focused on mass mobilizations within social movements.¹ In contrast, anthropologists have studied political participation in various domains, not just practices that fall within the political field narrowly defined.²

A domain where political participation can be captured ethnographically is infrastructure, a significant arena of political contestation. Social scientists have come to perceive infra-

structures as sociotechnical systems that structure or transform social relations in planned or unplanned ways.³ These assemblages represent the material basis for the negotiation of everyday political questions. Users engage with infrastructures through various everyday practices (e.g., water management, transportation, electricity use). As they unfold, these practices involve negotiations through which political priorities are defined and redefined.⁴ Infrastructures generate expectations among their users; expectations that are frequently frustrated by their everyday failures and decay due to disinvestment in and lack of maintenance of infrastructures, sparking further political action.⁵

In my broader research, I am interested in the ways human-environment relations are materially constituted through infrastructures. This entails paying attention to how nature becomes “infrastructured” (e.g., planting forests to reduce erosion and stabilize embankments) as well as how natural environments are reshaped through infrastructure development, use, and abandonment.⁶

In this paper, I draw insights from examples of grassroots approaches to infrastructure I have encountered in my research as potential sources of inspirational practices that can posi-

¹ Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso, “The Study of Political Participation Across Research Traditions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation*, ed. Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198861126.013.1>.

² Julia M. Eckert, “Anthropology and Political Participation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation*, ed. Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198861126.013.6>.

³ Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita, “Introduction: Infrastructural Complications,” in *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, ed. Penny Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita (London: Routledge, 2016), 18–35.

⁴ Jessica Barnes, *Cultivating the Nile: The Everyday Politics of Water in Egypt* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁵ Stefan Dorondel and Cristina Posner, “Infrastructure, Feral Waters and Power Relations in Rural Romania,” *Critique of Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (June 1, 2022): 172–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X221095935>.

tively shape a just green transition in the Balkans. Focusing on infrastructure allows us to observe the mundane aspects of the state's presence in citizens' everyday lives and the ways in which they can direct their political action to influence the course of the green transition in the Balkans. My interlocutors engage in a variety of practices of everyday politics related to infrastructure, from appealing to state representatives to resolve problems to proposing new procedures for state agencies, as well as offering alternative expertise and spotlighting problematic state representatives. By examining the ways ordinary people relate to infrastructural interventions in the landscapes they inhabit, I seek to identify modalities of political participation that should be supported and scaled up.

Recent clashes regarding proposals for new infrastructure development across the Balkans have revealed citizens' hopes and fears after the fact. A preferable alternative would involve formulating policy based on prior knowledge of these hopes and fears. Finding ways to balance contradictory views is essential in the policymaking process. Ideally, citizens should be included in the early stages of policy development, specifically in agenda setting and formulation, to set the stage for large-scale societal change that is not only green but also just.

Participation and the Desire for a Functional State

The repertoire of grassroots relations to infrastructure encompasses a variety of political acts, from demands for increased infrastructure development to expectations of maintenance and repair, as well as opposition to infrastructural disturbance.⁷ Most of these political acts are directed towards the state. Anthropological scholarship has highlighted various ways in which people

⁶ Cf. Ashley Carse, *Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014); Christina Dunbar-Hester, *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Atsuro Morita, "Multispecies Infrastructure: Infrastructural Inversion and Involuntary Entanglements in the Chao Phraya Delta, Thailand," *Ethnos* 82, no. 4 (August 8, 2017): 738–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1119175>.

desire the state's presence in their everyday lives. For example, Monique Nuijten's ethnography of a Mexican peasant community shows the profound investment people have in finding the right intermediaries to help them bridge the gap between themselves and the state. Even if the state bureaucracy of Mexico had limited control over local practices, the state's culture was strongly felt among the peasants, who constantly speculated about the state and sought ways to tap into its power.⁸

Scholars of the former Yugoslavia also highlight this desire for a functional state, which relies on explicit or implicit critiques of the actually existing state. Anthropologist Stef Jansen notes that people in Bosnia and Herzegovina often talked about their wish to see and be seen by the state. "A projected 'normal state' was at the heart of their yearnings for 'normal lives.'"⁹ In Serbia, where my research is located, people recount stories about the stability of socialist Yugoslavia, contrasting it with the chaos that ensued after its breakup. Many people believe that both their socioeconomic status and the functioning of the state have suffered since the good days of socialism.¹⁰ Due to their strong desire for a functional state that enables "normal life," non-state actors welcome and can actively work to enable the state's involvement in their everyday lives. Additionally, I have encoun-

⁷ Stefan Dorondel and Stelu Șerban, "Healing Waters: Infrastructure and Capitalist Fantasies in the Socialist Ruins of Rural Bulgaria," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement* 41, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 127–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2019.1632176> ; Erdem Evren, "The Rise and Decline of an Anti-Dam Campaign: Yusufeli Dam Project and the Temporal Politics of Development," *Water History* 6, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 405–19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12685-014-0120-8>; Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi, "Maintaining Whose Road?," in *Repair, Brokenness, Breakthrough: Ethnographic Responses*, ed. Francisco Martinez and Patrick Laviolette (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2019), 145–48.

⁸ Monique Nuijten, *Power, Community and the State: The Political Anthropology of Organisation in Mexico* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

⁹ Stef Jansen, *Yearnings in the Meantime* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2015), 8–9.

¹⁰ Ognjen Kojanić, "Nostalgia as a Practice of the Self in Post-Socialist Serbia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3–4 (2015): 195–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2015.1090760>.

tered many citizens striving to make the state work through various practices, showing potential pathways for improving citizen participation, as I suggest below.

When observing how people relate to the state, it is useful to view the state not as a coherent, monolithic agent but rather as a set of practices that connect diverse actors to facilitate governance. Anthropologist Tania Murray Li highlights the work of disparate actors who enable community forest management in Indonesia. In addition to state forest bureaucracies, there are villagers, laborers, entrepreneurs, officials, activists, aid donors, and scientists, all of whom pull disparate elements together.¹¹

These insights are crucial for understanding how political participation can be expanded among ordinary citizens. In what follows, I describe why infrastructure should be seen as a focal point for everyday political action in human-environment relations and propose ways in which political participation in this domain can be expanded.

Infrastructure as a Domain of Public Participation

Infrastructures such as canals, pipelines, or dams – developed with the stated goal of increasing economic activity by enhancing extraction, accumulation, and exchange – profoundly restructure human-environment relationships. As anthropologist Ashley Carse observes, both humans and nature are enlisted to participate in economic processes within complex infrastructural assemblages.¹² He and other scholars have demonstrated the profound entanglement between natural and built environments, as well as how infrastructural assemblages become a medium for the life and death of ecosystems.

¹¹ Tania Murray Li, “Practices of Assemblage and Community Forest Management,” *Economy and Society* 36, no. 2 (May 1, 2007): 263–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140701254308>.

¹² Carse, *Beyond the Big Ditch*.

Over the past decade, discussions about the social and ecological consequences of infrastructure have revealed major political conflicts in Serbia. Some have even sparked social movements that organize various forms of protest aimed at preventing or reshaping infrastructural development. Critiques of megaprojects have coalesced into major organizational forms aimed at resisting them, particularly when they are perceived as leading to environmental devastation and increased social inequality. This has been the case with the urban redevelopment megaproject Belgrade Waterfront, which gave rise to the urban social movement We Won't Let Belgrade D(r)own (*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*). This movement recently transformed into the political party Green-Left Front (*Zeleno-levi front*), which advocates for, among other things, more democratic decision-making in the green transition process.

Most recently, Rio Tinto's proposed lithium mine has generated a huge backlash, resulting in a series of protests and blockades across Serbia. The lithium mining case is especially relevant, as it illustrates the complexity of dealing with the environmental transition in the context of climate change. On the one hand, the lithium mine is advertised by Rio Tinto, the Serbian government, and the European Union as an important step in nearshoring the production of electric vehicles. This is argued to be inevitable if Europe aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the transportation sector. On the other hand, the project's opponents argue that the consequences of environmental devastation will fall unequally on the shoulders of Serbian citizens residing near the mine, whereas the benefits will accrue to producers in the elec-

¹¹ Barbara Stoltz emphasizes the need to distinguish between the concepts of environmental art, ecological art, and sustainable art.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, an American art theorist and historian, is one of the most influential intellectuals in the field of contemporary art, known for her contributions to the analysis and criticism of contemporary artistic practices, particularly in the contexts of modernism and postmodernism.

¹³ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Koenig Books, 2013), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 62.

tric vehicles value chain and those who can afford to buy electric vehicles.

Such a divergence in views is standard for many infrastructural projects proposed under the “green transition” umbrella. Many Balkan countries have witnessed a rise in protests against small hydropower plants, which are seen as offering no benefits to local communities in the areas where they are built while simultaneously devastating local ecosystems. These proposals have mobilized large swaths of the population, leading to new forms of political subjectivation centered on common ecological concerns.¹³ Observers have noted that citizens across the Balkans have organized to protect natural resources and the environment through mass movements time and time again. Such mass protest movements represent “an important way of expressing anger and objection over government policies and antagonism against political leadership and their lack of sensitivity or will to address and solve citizens’ problems.”¹⁴

From Appeals to the State to Participating in Policy Formulation

In addition to citizens’ mobilizations that have attracted considerable attention in the Balkans, there are also many localized examples of grassroots relations to infrastructures that have received far less media coverage. While sometimes they are organized around opposition to infrastructural development, that is not always the case. In the case of Pančevački rit (the Pančevo Marshes) in Belgrade, citizens have been involved in a range of protests demanding more infrastructural development; in particular, they have advocated for the expansion of the meager

¹³ Jelena Vasiljević, “Environmental Activism in the Balkans: From Direct Action to Political Subjectivity,” *BiEPAG* (blog), September 16, 2020, <https://www.biepag.eu/blog/environmental-activism-in-the-balkans-from-direct-action-to-political-subjectivity>.

¹⁴ Vedran Džihic et al., “Unleashing the Potential for Change through Social Movements and Civic Initiatives” (The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2021), <https://rifdt.ifdt.bg.ac.rs/handle/123456789/2795>.

sewerage network in their part of the city. In its current form, the infrastructural assemblage consists of an underdeveloped network of sanitary sewerage pipes, along with septic and sedimentation tanks. This system is insufficient to manage increasing volumes of raw sewage and industrial sludge, which are typically discharged directly into drainage canals or the Danube. The citizens of the Pančevo Marshes have been leading a public pressure campaign for many years, demanding investments that would lead to a systematic solution to this problem. These improvements would lead to a better quality of life in the Pančevo Marshes, as well as a reduction in pollution released by residents and industries in this area into the Danube.

In this case, the citizens of Pančevo Marshes are not opposing infrastructures that they perceive as harmful, but rather demanding infrastructure development. This illustrates a particular form of grassroots involvement in everyday politics concerning infrastructural issues that hopefully may yield a solution to the issues afflicting citizens. And yet, in this case, the citizens are appealing to the state to resolve the problem they are facing without expecting their involvement in the solution. Thus, it may not serve as an ideal example of citizens' participation in the creation of policies that affect them.

If the goal is to deepen citizens' participation, this type of involvement is insufficient. Ideally, citizens should be included in the agenda-setting and formulation stages of the policy process as crucial partners. In the following section, I outline some of the ways to enhance the policy process, leading to a more meaningful inclusion of citizens in policy creation.

Guidelines on Improving Participation in Relation to "Street-Level Bureaucracy"

As mentioned above, citizens often describe the state as the strongest agent of change. It is often seen as potentially crucial in achieving various positive outcomes in society, even if – perhaps paradoxically – it is simultaneously described as internally fractured or limited in its capacities, while its officials are

seen as corrupt and incompetent. Critics have pointed out that the way policy is created in Serbia is far from ideal if the goal is to expand democratic participation, with decisions frequently made under non-transparent conditions. For example, the aforementioned Belgrade Waterfront was sanctioned via a special law (*lex specialis*), which gave the investors a *carte blanche* to avoid following existing planning documents and strategies. A similar pattern can be detected in the case of the Specialized Exhibition or Expo 2027. Even in projects of a much smaller scale, such as the reshaping of a neighborhood or a city block, the government frequently employs procedural maneuvers to reduce public participation in decision-making as much as possible. This puts civil society in a defensive position, where citizens and organizations are forced to mobilize against decisions that have already been made and have a great influence on their lives.

During my ethnographic research in the Pančevo Marshes, I have seen many examples where citizens have successfully persuaded the state to address their issues. They employ a variety of practices to make the state work, and in the process, facilitate participation through formal and informal means. For example, they arduously learn how to communicate with various offices (e.g., inspectors, public utility companies, etc.) to clean up illegal garbage dumps or offer alternative expertise to supplement the work of state-employed experts in an attempt to protect an area from development.¹⁵ Yet their paths to effectiveness are winding and unpredictable, their success never guaranteed. What is needed is the expansion of avenues for participation so that citizens can take part substantively in the creation of strategies and overarching rules as well as in shaping particular projects.

As part of Serbia's road to EU accession, the government has adopted measures to expand participation, for example, through the Open Government Partnership. Although the legal framework

¹⁵ Ognjen Kojanić, "Rethinking the Failure of Waste Infrastructures with Jackals," *Roadsides* 8 (2022): 58–64, <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202200809>; Ognjen Kojanić, "Estimations of Value in 'Belgrade's Amazonia,'" *Economic Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2024): 112–21, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12305>.

for the participation of the public in decision-making processes is typically in line with EU standards, there are many hurdles in practice. There are several policy papers suggesting ways to improve participation in decision making, ranging from guidelines offered by international bodies,¹⁶ to research-based recommendations written by public policy experts,¹⁷ as well as recommendations made by civil society organizations participating in policy processes.¹⁸

Based on my research and going beyond the recommendations found in these policy papers, I focus on the ways “street-level bureaucracy” can be improved:

- 1) Citizens must be empowered to take part in complex political and bureaucratic processes. The burden of such education should be placed on state institutions.
- 2) State representatives should be proactive in soliciting citizens’ participation. This can be achieved by establishing connections with various organizations interested in relevant topics, even before particular policies are created. Maintaining direct connections with such organizations can enable policymakers to incorporate citizens’ desires in the decision-making process.
- 3) There should be a wide array of formats for participation. State representatives should organize forums, town halls, round-

¹⁶ OECD, “OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes,” OECD Public Governance Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1787/f765caf6-en>; Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, “Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process,” 2013.

¹⁷ Džihic et al., “Unleashing the Potential for Change through Social Movements and Civic Initiatives”; Miloš Mojsilović et al., “Neposredno učešće građana u upravljanju lokalnom zajednicom: Problemi, izazovi i preporuke za unapređenje procesa” (Beograd: Misija OEBS u Srbiji, 2011).

¹⁸ Sanja Ilić and Aleksandar Bogdanović, “Sa reči na delo – kako do delotvornijeg učešća javnosti: Model širokog procesa konsultacija” (Beograd: Beogradska otvorena škola, 2023); Marko Aksentijević, Božena Stojić, and Jovana Timotijević, “Priručnik za odbranu prostora (dopunjeno izdanje)” (Beograd: Ministarstvo prostora, 2023).



tables, and workshops near the citizens affected by the decisions, scheduling them at times that are conducive to broad public participation. At a minimum, state institutions should conduct regular surveys of citizens to gather their opinions on relevant issues.

4) Institutions should create mechanisms to facilitate participation at various stages in the policy process. Crucially, citizens must be included in formulating proposals and in monitoring the implementation of decisions.

By implementing these changes, state institutions could meaningfully incorporate citizens at various stages of the policy process. Incorporating citizens' hopes and fears into the policy process from the outset could pave the way for a broad societal change that is not only green but also just.

