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PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN MINING REGIONS



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Tamara Maričić • Marijana Pantić • Ana Perić

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EDITORS:

Tamara Maričić, Principal Research Fellow
Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia

Marijana Pantić, Senior Research Associate
Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia

Ana Perić, Assistant Professor
University College Dublin – School of Architecture, Planning and Environmental Policy, Dublin, Ireland

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Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, Bulevar kralja Aleksandra 73/II, Belgrade, Serbia, www.iaus.ac.rs;

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Geography, Studentski trg 3/III, Belgrade, Serbia, www.gef.bg.ac.rs;

University of Belgrade – Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, Kraljice Natalije 45, Belgrade, Serbia, www.ifdt.bg.ac.rs;

University of Belgrade – Technical Faculty in Bor, Vojske Jugoslavije 12, Bor, Serbia, www.tfbor.bg.ac.rs

FOR THE PUBLISHERS:

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LANGUAGE EDITING: Alice Copple-Tošić

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BRIDGING CITIZENS' AND INSTITUTIONS' PERSPECTIVES IN SERBIA: PARTICIPATION IN THE SPATIAL PLANNING OF MINING REGIONS

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Marijana Pantić[1]
Dušanka Milosavljević[2]
Milena Toković[3]
Tamara Maričić[4]
Milovan Vuković[5]

BRIDGING CITIZENS' AND INSTITUTIONS' PERSPECTIVES IN SERBIA: PARTICIPATION IN THE SPATIAL PLANNING OF MINING REGIONS

ABSTRACT

Despite extensive scholarship on participatory planning, limited attention has been paid to the persistent gap between formal participatory frameworks and citizens' engagement and perceptions in mining regions. Public participation in spatial and urban planning of mining regions has been examined through conceptual lenses that emphasise power relations, governance processes, motivation drivers, and effectiveness of participatory methods. The case study draws on three theoretical pillars — participatory governance and perception gaps, motivation theories in public participation, and participatory planning methods — to interpret findings from a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with institutional actors. These pillars support analysis of turnout, motivations for (non)participation, and preferred methods, as well as misalignments between citizens' and institutional perceptions, with emphasis on mining areas. The study employs a mixed–methods approach, relying primarily on primary data. The quantitative component uses survey data from residents in the Bor and Majdanpek mining region, capturing awareness, motivation, and engagement with formal planning procedures. The qualitative component consisted of in–depth interviews with planners, national and local authorities, mining companies, and NGOs, providing insights into institutional perspectives on participation, barriers, and practices. This enables a nuanced understanding of participation dynamics in resource extraction areas in Serbia, highlighting systemic constraints and opportunities for engagement. The study contributes to debates on participatory planning by linking empirical evidence to conceptual frameworks, emphasising citizen awareness, comprehension, and feedback mechanisms in meaningful involvement of relevant actors in resource–rich regions.

Keywords: public participation; spatial planning; participatory governance; mining regions; Serbia.

[1] Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, Serbia, marijana.d.pantic@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000–0001–8328–4077.
[2] University of Belgrade – Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, Serbia, dusanka.milosavljevic@ifdt.bg.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000–0003–3140–9709.
[3] University of Belgrade – Faculty of Geography, Serbia, milena.tokovic@gef.bg.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000–0001–5380–4828.
[4] Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia, Serbia, tamara@iaus.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000–0003–4827–5065.
[5] University of Belgrade – Technical Faculty in Bor, Serbia, mvukovic@tfbor.bg.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000–0003–1715–1078.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public participation in spatial planning has been widely recognised as a mechanism to improve transparency, legitimacy, and conflict mitigation, particularly in specific and sensitive environments characterised by intensive resource extraction (Owen & Kemp, 2013; Bebbington et al., 2018; Maričić & Oranje, 2025). In post–socialist countries, however, planning systems often retain centralised governance structures and formalistic participatory procedures, limiting citizens' influence on decisions with significant territorial and environmental consequences (Vujošević & Nedović–Budić, 2006; Živanović & Gatarić, 2021; Pantić & Čolić, 2023; Nikolić et al., 2025). Even the existence of vast international "hard" and "soft" legislation that regulates stakeholder participation cannot guarantee its application, especially in developing countries (Maričić, 2026). More advanced participation standards that were already established in the 1950s in Serbia (Yugoslavia), such as the principle of "cross–acceptance", have been forgotten or neglected in the current planning practice (Vujošević et al., 2012). Within Serbia's highly centralised decision–making model, local authorities frequently struggle with inefficient administration and inadequate communication between the public, private, and civil sectors (Petrović et al., 2022). The participatory approach has been largely overlooked, particularly with respect to involving citizens and valuing their opinions and perspectives (Perić, 2020a). The lack of autonomy and capacity within city administration can be seen as the legacy of a redistributive, top–down model of urban development (Toković, 2017). These constraints are especially pronounced in Serbian mining regions, where long–standing industrial traditions and institutional path dependencies shape both governance cultures and public expectations (Maričić, 2014).

Eastern Serbia's mining cities and municipalities, such as Bor and Majdanpek, illustrate the mentioned dynamics. Previous research has shown that local planning processes are affected by low institutional responsiveness, complex administrative procedures, and limited accountability mechanisms, which together contribute to reduced civic engagement (Vajović, 2017; Maričić et al., 2018). In such contexts, low turnout in public participation is frequently interpreted by institutions as a sign of apathy, whereas citizens often frame it as a rational response to structural barriers, distrust, or perceptions that decisions are predetermined, particularly when linked to major extractive investments (Bebbington et al., 2018; Perić, 2020b; Toković et al., 2025).

Motivations for public engagement in the planning of mining–affected areas are often shaped by perceived risks, environmental concerns, and the protection of local resources (Cvetinović & Veselinović, 2013; Urošević et al., 2018; Voza et al., 2022). Nonetheless, participation typically declines when communities face information deficits, power asymmetries, or anticipated conflict (Vuković et al., 2014). At the same time, research on participatory methods suggests that statutory tools, such as public reviews and early public displays, are insufficient to facilitate meaningful engagement in contested environments (Innes & Booher, 2010). Evidence points to the need for more interactive, transparent, and locally embedded methods that can foster trust and allow communities to articulate concerns in a deliberative setting (Cilliers, 2020).

Despite this body of work, a few studies in Serbia have systematically compared citizens' and institutional actors' perceptions of participatory planning in mining regions. The literature lacks integrative analyses that jointly consider turnout and motivations and that examine how perception gaps between citizens and institutions shape planning outcomes. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates public participation in the mining region of Eastern Serbia by combining survey data from local residents with semi–structured interviews conducted among governmental actors, NGOs, professional planners, and representatives of mining companies. This comparative approach provides a multidimensional understanding of why participation remains limited and how planning practice can be enhanced in conflict–prone extractive contexts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that brings together insights from participatory governance, motivation theories, and research on participatory methods in planning. These three strands of literature jointly explain why participation often remains symbolic, why citizens engage unevenly across contexts, and why institutional practices frequently diverge from public expectations. By examining power relations, motivational dynamics, and the design of engagement tools, the framework offers a holistic lens to interpret the perception gaps and participation patterns identified in the empirical analysis.

2.1 PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE AND PERCEPTION GAPS

Participatory governance refers to the set of institutionalised and non–institutionalised mechanisms through which citizens engage in decision–making processes, particularly in contexts involving public goods, spatial development, and community well–being. Foundational works in the field have long emphasised that participation is not merely a technical procedure but a deeply political process shaped by power asymmetries, institutional cultures, and citizens' experiences with public authorities.

The classical model of Arnstein's (1969) **ladder of participation** conceptualises public involvement as a continuum ranging from manipulation and tokenism to full citizen control, illustrating that the degree of public influence is highly variable. While contemporary planning systems have formally embraced participatory procedures, many remain situated in the lower tiers of Arnstein's ladder – consultation and informing – where citizens are heard but seldom empowered. This framework is particularly relevant in analysing the perceived ineffectiveness of planning procedures in contexts of post–socialist transitional societies such as Serbia, where formal compliance with legal requirements does not necessarily translate into genuine citizen influence (Perić et al., 2021).

More recent scholarship, particularly Fung's (2006) **democracy cube**, moves beyond hierarchical notions of power and conceptualises participation through three

dimensions: who participates, how participants communicate and make decisions, and how much influence they hold. This multidimensional understanding allows for a nuanced comparison between citizens' preferences for inclusive and interactive methods, and institutions' reliance on formal, legally prescribed procedures. It highlights that participation mechanisms differ not only in openness but also in quality, deliberative potential, and expected outcomes.

Research in **collaborative governance** (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Quick & Bryson, 2022) further underscores that trust, transparency, and communication are essential for meaningful engagement. Lack of trust in institutions – often rooted in historical experiences of limited responsiveness – acts as a barrier to participation and reduces turnout. From this perspective, citizens' perception that participation procedures are symbolic or ineffectual can be interpreted as a rational response to a governance system that does not consistently provide feedback or demonstrate the value of their input.

Complementing these frameworks, Rowe and Frewe's (2005) **Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms** (Gene Rowe & Lynn J. Frewer) classifies participatory processes according to the direction of information flow and the degree of interaction between citizens and decision–makers. By distinguishing public communication, consultation, and participation, the model highlights that many formal planning procedures remain primarily consultative, limiting citizens' actual influence and reinforcing perceptions of tokenism.

Similarly, Hofer and Kaufmann's (2022) **Actors–Arenas–Aims Framework** (Katharina Hofer & David Kaufmann) offers an integrated perspective that examines who participates, in which arenas, and with what objectives. This approach is particularly relevant in mining regions, where diverse actors—public authorities, companies, and local communities—operate across overlapping institutional settings and pursue potentially divergent goals, from procedural compliance to conflict management.

From a more critical standpoint, Legacy's (2017) **Crisis of Participatory Planning thesis** questions whether institutionalised participation has become routinised and depoliticised, with limited transformative capacity. Expanding this argument, Legacy et al.'s (2019) **relational critique of post-political planning** emphasises that participatory processes are inherently shaped by power relations, situated conflicts, and competing rationalities rather than neutral consensus–building.

Studies on **perception gaps** between citizens and institutions (e.g., Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014) demonstrate that public authorities often misinterpret low participation as apathy rather than the result of structural barriers, insufficient communication, and limited opportunities for influence. This body of literature is directly relevant to the study at hand, where institutions tend to attribute low turnout to disinterest, while citizens frequently point to inadequate information channels, procedural complexity, and distrust. Understanding these perception gaps is essential when explaining the divergences identified in the empirical findings of this research.

Taken together, these frameworks indicate that participatory governance in Serbia should be assessed not only through formal procedures, but also through the interaction of the degree of citizen influence, the institutional design of participatory arenas, power asymmetries, trust in institutions, and perception gaps between citizens and authorities. In a post–socialist context shaped by legalistic compliance and strong administrative traditions, participation may be procedurally adequate yet substantively limited. For the Serbian case study, these dimensions structure the discussion by focusing on whether participation goes beyond consultation, how actors position themselves within institutional arenas, and how distrust and institutional interpretations of low turnout shape participatory outcomes.

2.2 MOTIVATION THEORIES IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The second theoretical pillar concerns the motivations that shape citizens' willingness or reluctance to engage in participatory procedures. Motivational factors operate at individual, relational, and structural levels and are influenced by both internal beliefs and external conditions.

The **civic voluntarism model** (Verba et al., 1995) provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for understanding participation behaviour. It highlights three components necessary for engagement: (1) resources (time, knowledge, skills), (2) psychological engagement or motivation, and (3) mobilisation by external actors. The model suggests that participation is not solely a matter of willingness, but also of capacity and opportunity. For example, even motivated citizens may not participate if they lack information about upcoming planning procedures or perceive them as too technical or inaccessible.

Complementing this, **collective action theory** (Olson, 1965) explains that individuals are less likely to participate when they perceive their personal contribution as insignificant or when benefits are diffuse. This aspect is highly relevant in planning contexts where citizens believe that decisions are predetermined or that participation is merely procedural rather than consequential. Non–participation in this view is not apathy but a rational cost–benefit calculation.

Political psychology literature emphasises **trust, self-efficacy, and perceived influence** as critical determinants of participation. Studies show that when citizens trust institutions to consider their input, they are more willing to invest time and effort; when trust is low, participation declines (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Similarly, **internal efficacy** (belief in one's ability to understand issues) and **external efficacy** (belief that authorities will respond) significantly shape behaviour. In contexts where planning documents are highly technical and communication is insufficient, both forms of efficacy tend to be low.

Research on **participation fatigue** (Porlezza, 2019) explains long–term demotivation: citizens who repeatedly experience participatory processes without observable outcomes may gradually disengage. This framework helps explain discrepancies between institutional expectations and citizens' experiences in spatial planning.

Taken together, motivation theories illuminate why citizens may be interested in planning outcomes but still not participate; they also explain why certain groups (e.g., those with higher education or stronger environmental concerns) tend to be more active. These theoretical insights enlighten the interpretation of motives recorded in the survey and the institutional explanations provided in interviews.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that participation in spatial planning is shaped by resources, perceived efficacy, trust in institutions, mobilisation efforts, and the expected impact of engagement. In the Bor–Majdanpek case study, these dimensions will be examined not only as determinants of citizens' willingness to participate, but also as points of divergence between citizens' and institutional actors'interpretations of turnout and motivation. Particular attention will therefore be paid to how citizens explain their engagement or non–engagement, and how institutions interpret the same patterns, revealing potential perception gaps in the planning process.

2.3 PARTICIPATORY METHODS AND PLANNING PRACTICE

The third theoretical pillar concerns the methods used to engage the public and their effectiveness in fostering meaningful participation. The literature distinguishes between formal, legally mandated procedures and innovative or deliberative methods that promote interaction, understanding, and co–creation. The planning field has long discussed the tension between **statutory procedures** – such as public reviews, announcements, and opportunities to submit written comments – and **collaborative planning approaches** that emphasise co–production, dialogue, and shared learning (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). Statutory methods are often limited in their inclusiveness and interaction, aiming primarily at legal compliance rather than substantive engagement. This corresponds with the institutional actors' reliance on the legally prescribed methods identified in the interviews.

At the same time, studies highlight the growing importance of **innovative participatory tools**, such as participatory GIS, visualisation platforms, workshops, design games, neighbourhood walks, digital whiteboards, and virtual reality (Evans–Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Batty, 2018). These tools can make planning more accessible, especially when complex spatial information must be conveyed to non–expert audiences. Survey findings showing citizens' preference for more visual and interactive methods align with broader trends in participatory planning.

Research on **information channels** underscores that clear, timely, and citizen–oriented communication is a prerequisite to effective participation. Mass media announcements remain insufficient if not complemented with targeted outreach, digital communication, and locally embedded channels. Studies show that a lack of awareness about planning processes is one of the most significant barriers to participation worldwide (Pantić et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship on **co-creation and living labs** (Voorberg et al., 2014; Crosby et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2024) argues that participatory methods are most successful when authorities and citizens jointly explore problems and solutions. Such methods promote mutual understanding, reduce perception gaps, and can enhance trust in institutions. However, they often require more institutional resources, capacity, and flexibility than many planning systems currently possess.

Finally, research on **administrative path dependency** demonstrates that public institutions often adhere to familiar procedures, even when more effective alternatives exist, due to organisational culture, limited capacity, and risk aversion (Pierson, 2000; Sydow et al., 2009; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). This helps explain why the institutions interviewed for this study remain heavily oriented towards formal procedures, while citizens express their preference for more interactive, transparent, and accessible participatory formats.

Taken together, this body of literature suggests that the effectiveness of participatory governance depends not only on the availability of formal statutory procedures, but also on the type of engagement methods employed, the quality of communication channels, and the institutional capacity and willingness to adopt innovative approaches. In the case study, the analysis therefore focuses on: how existing legally mandated procedures are perceived by both citizens and institutional actors; how communication about planning processes is organised, and; whether there is openness towards more interactive and deliberative tools. Particular attention is paid to the divergence between institutional reliance on established formal mechanisms and citizens' expressed preferences for more accessible and dialogical forms of participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine how citizens and institutional actors perceive public participation in spatial planning in Serbia, with special focus on the Bor–Majdanpek mining area in Eastern Serbia – highly dependent on the extraction and processing of copper and gold for more than a century. Research attempts to identify key areas where interpretations diverge – particularly regarding turnout and motivations to participate from the perspective of different stakeholders.

The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed–methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative components are combined to enable a comprehensive understanding of how citizens and institutional actors interpret participation in spatial planning processes in Serbia, and in what ways their perceptions differ with respect to turnout and motives of engagement. The rationale for this design lies in its capacity to first capture patterns in citizens' attitudes and behaviours, and then contextualise and explain these patterns through in–depth insights from institutional representatives.

3.1 QUALITATIVE COMPONENT: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The qualitative phase consisted of 19 semi–structured interviews with experts representing a range of institutions and organisations involved in spatial planning processes in Serbia, especially in Bor and Majdanpek local administrative units. Participants included representatives from the national (3) and local (2) government sectors, national (3) and local (2) non–governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as professional planners active in practice (2) and in practice & research (5), along with the representatives of mining companies operating in the Bor–Majdanpek region (2) (Table 1). This diversity of actors made it possible to capture multiple institutional perspectives relevant to participation in mining–affected planning contexts.

Table 1. Interview respondents

PSEUDONYM	SECTOR	REFERENCE IN THE TEXT
Goran	national government	Goran, ng
Sana	national government	Sana, ng
Silvia	national government	Silvia, ng
Davina	local government	Davina, lg
Kira	local government	Kira, lg
Iris	national-level NGO	Iris, n-NGO
Manfred	national-level NGO	Manfred, n-NGO
Anita	national-level NGO	Anita, n-NGO
David	local-level NGO	David, l-NGO
Radek	local-level NGO	Radek, l-NGO
Jelisaveta	professional planner active in practice	Jelisaveta, p&p
Mirela	professional planner active in practice	Mirela, p&p
Blanka	professional planner active in practice & research	Blanka, p&r
Neli	professional planner active in practice & research	Neli, p&r
Nolan	professional planner active in practice & research	Nolan, p&r
Ramona	professional planner active in practice & research	Ramona, p&r
Zara	professional planner active in practice & research	Zara, p&r
Mladen	representative of a mining company	Mladen, mc
Serhio	representative of a mining company	Serhio, mc

Thematic analysis was applied using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes reflected the study's analytical focus – perceptions of turnout and motives attributed to citizens – while inductive codes captured emerging themes such as institutional constraints, administrative path dependence, communication challenges, and alternative explanations for low participation. This approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of how institutional actors understand and experience participation processes.

The interview guide was structured in accordance with the study's theoretical framework and organised into three thematic blocks. The first block addressed institutional understandings of public participation, including perceptions of its purpose, effectiveness, and influence on decision–making. The second block explored explanations for citizen turnout and motivations to participate or abstain. The third block focused on the methods and communication channels used in participatory procedures. While the broader interview protocol covered additional topics related to spatial planning in mining–affected regions, the present analysis concentrates specifically on questions concerning participation, turnout, and perceived motivations. This structure ensured consistency between the theoretical framework and empirical data collection.

3.2 QUANTITATIVE COMPONENT: CITIZEN SURVEY

The quantitative component consisted of a structured survey conducted with 300 respondents, selected through a random sampling procedure to ensure a representative sample of residents of both urban and rural settlements in the City of Bor and the Municipality of Majdanpek, located in Eastern Serbia. This is a historically significant mining region, with a continuous tradition of copper extraction since the early 20th century.

The survey was also carried out as part of the MINIPART project. A detailed presentation of the survey design, instrument, and full statistical results has been published separately in Urban Science (Pantić et al., 2026), as well as partially in Spatium (Toković et al., 2025). For the present study, these survey findings serve as the empirical basis for comparing citizens' views with institutional perspectives collected in the qualitative phase. Survey data were analysed using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques to identify trends in turnout and motivations for (non)participation. These quantified patterns provided the structure for cross–actor comparison.

The survey instrument was structured in line with the study's theoretical framework and organised into three main sections. The first section examined citizens' perceptions of public participation in spatial planning, including perceived influence, transparency, and institutional responsiveness. The second section addressed motivational factors, such as access to information, perceived efficacy, trust in public authorities, and reasons for participation or non–participation. The third section explored evaluations of existing participatory methods and communication channels, as well as preferences for more interactive or innovative formats. This structure ensured alignment between the quantitative instrument and the theoretical pillars guiding the study.

3.3 INTEGRATIVE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The final analytical step involved a structured integration of findings from both components. Quantitative survey patterns were compared with qualitative insights from institutional interviews to identify convergences and divergences between citizens' and institutions' perspectives. This comparison made it possible to pinpoint perception gaps, particularly regarding the interpretation of low turnout and the motives of participation. Through this integrative process, the study synthesises behavioural evidence with institutional narratives, thereby offering a multidimensional understanding of the participation landscape in Serbia's planning system.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

All participants took part voluntarily. In the survey, responses were collected anonymously. Interview participants provided either oral or written informed consent, with the option to be identified or remain anonymous. No personal or sensitive data is disclosed, and all findings are presented in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality and respect for participants' preferences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the mixed–methods design enables a structured comparison between citizens' and institutional actors' perspectives, the study is based on a regional case (Bor and Majdanpek), which may limit the direct transferability of findings to other planning contexts in Serbia. Second, while the survey relied on a random and demographically balanced sample, self–reported data remain subject to recall bias and social desirability bias, particularly regarding past participation and motivations. Third, qualitative insights reflect the viewpoints of the 19 interviewed experts – including governmental, non–governmental, planning, and mining–sector representatives – which, although diverse, may not fully encompass all institutional standpoints involved in planning processes. Finally, the comparison of citizen and institutional perspectives is interpretative by nature; perceptual gaps identified in this study may therefore be shaped not only by structural differences but also by the researchers' analytical framing.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of public turnout and residents' willingness to participate in planning processes indicates that the central issue is public awareness of participation opportunities (informativeness) in spatial and urban planning procedures. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of understanding the content of spatial plans and the role of spatial planning as a prerequisite to meaningful participation. Finally, the findings underscore the significance of feedback mechanisms and trust as key factors influencing both the quality and sustainability of public participation.

4.1 TURNOVER AND MOTIVATION

Interview respondents

Interview respondents are unanimous in their assessment of the extremely low level of participation in formal public participation procedures. They share experiences in which *public participation is practically non-existent. The public does not participate at all (Zara, p&r),* and where *it often happens that only a very small number of citizens attend public hearings, and that these are mostly men (Neli, p&r).*

With regard to mining projects, the situation is similar. One planner testified to experiencing weak participation in the Jadar project:

> *low public participation and a calm situation (...). I think there were [only] seven objections during the public review, and none of them challenged the project or its daily activities. They referred to roads, property, infrastructure, parcels, etc. (Nolan, p&r). Particularly low participation is observed in rural areas, where the absence of women is especially pronounced. In these contexts, women are generally not landowners, which some planners interpret as a key reason for their frequent non-participation in formal participatory procedures.*

When discussing low turnout, planners tend to attribute it not to shortcomings in institutional design or their own professional practices, but rather to "uninterested citizens": *Not many citizens participate, I must admit... they're just not very interested (Jelisaveta, p&p).*

A recurring pattern among respondents representing the authorities and mining companies is to interpret low public engagement as a reflection of broader societal trends and individualism, rather than structural barriers. As one interviewee explains:

> *Times have changed; people are more turned towards themselves, and they are not open to communication, nor are they interested... It's a social problem, but it's embedded in everything. If it weren't for that social problem, we wouldn't have an issue with public presentations [hearings] (Serhio, mc).*

Another respondent echoes this sentiment: *We've come to a time with no understanding. Everyone looks after themselves — that's a 'not in my backyard' effect (Goran, ng).*

At the same time, a respondent representing the NGO sector highlights another dimension of low engagement, namely the pervasive fear of potential retaliation: *There is fear, and people do not want to get involved with it at all (...). They get labelled immediately and think they are doing something against the government. The overall climate in society is somehow unfavourable for organising this. (Radek, I-NGO).*

Respondents' experiences further suggest that participation produces tangible outcomes primarily when private interests are at stake or in exceptional situations. As one interviewee observes,

> *There is an effect, but only at the level of private interests. I mostly think that comments related to increasing the number of storeys, changes in land use, and various minor interests tend to be accepted, while those concerning public interests are not (Anita, n-NGO); They are motivated when problems directly impact them. The greatest motivation is when something comes to their own home (Manfred, n-NGO).*

In some cases, this motivation is interpreted as explicitly economic, with objections framed around property value and compensation: *The majority of objections say: 'include my property, include my house, take the house and take everything'... There are more objections asking to be included in expropriation than to be excluded from it (Nolan, p&r).*

In mining regions, officials and company representatives frequently frame (non) participation as a pragmatic calculation rooted in economic dependency. As one representative of a mining company explains, *Anyone tied to the mine thinks that at a public presentation people will speak against the mine, so they would rather choose not to come (Serhio, mc).*

From this perspective, non–participation is interpreted as rational self–interest: *If a miner earns 250,000 RSD (...2,000 €)*[1]*, why would he care whether the Bor River is polluted? (Serhio, mc).*

Those directly affected by mining–related impacts—such as landowners and farmers—are perceived as significantly more motivated to engage, while the majority remain indifferent or supportive of mining activities regardless of the environmental consequences:

> *In mining areas, people who depend on the industry generally favour it, regardless of potential environmental impacts and If 90% of people depend on the mine, why would they show up to listen to someone speaking against it? (Serhio, mc).*

Some respondents go further, describing participation in such contexts as contradictory or even hypocritical: *It makes little sense to make a complaint against themselves — in the morning they work for the [mining] company, and in the afternoon, they go complain against it (Goran, ng).*

This interpretation of participation as interest–driven extends beyond mining regions and is echoed in respondents' broader assessments of public engagement. Several interviewees emphasise that participation tends to be reactive, emerging primarily in response to immediate and tangible threats. As one planner notes, public attention *appears only when people hear that there will be resettlement or land expropriation,* while planning processes otherwise remain *somewhere in the background* (Blanka,

[1] Median net salary in Serbia (2025) is ca. 85,000 RSD (~700 €).

p&r). Similarly, citizens are described as attending public hearings mainly to *check what will happen to their plot of land or house, to check what will happen, whether something will be demolished (Jelisaveta, p&p),*

with collective or transformative forms of engagement remaining rare. When issues of personal interest are not at stake, the motivation to participate in discussions on planning–related problems is recognised as political interest:

> *certain groups abuse the public review procedure, not only in relation to planning positions, but for broader political positions (...). Usually, someone appears from the local level and starts giving a political speech (Nolan, p&r).*

Even though respondents from all sectors and levels perceive personal and, occasionally, political interests as the primary drivers of citizen participation, some respondents describe small groups of citizens as "enthusiasts" motivated by a sense of civic responsibility and a desire for constructive engagement, seeking not merely to oppose plans but to contribute ideas and improve outcomes:

> *Participation does not always mean saying 'I don't want this,' but offering positive solutions (Silvia, ng); At least they can say they tried, and they will not simply allow things that directly affect their lives (Anita, n-NGO).*

There is also recognition of the potentially negative impacts of mining as a key motive for participation. As one planner explains, participants are often motivated by a desire to push for better solutions once they become aware of the problematic aspects of spatial plans:

> *It bothers me that they react only when they notice a problem, and I think that is what motivates them. I think they react only when they realise that something bad is going to happen, where something is planned (Zara, p&r).*

Respondents from the NGO sector point to forms of engagement that extend beyond formal participation procedures as being a relevant factor to increase turnout and enable more meaningful and effective involvement in planning. Informal and semi–formal participatory spaces — such as citizens' assemblies and meetings of local community councils — are described as more responsive, particularly when supported by the presence of experts. As a respondent recalls, one participatory process proved successful *because the experts and we [NGO] were present at that assembly*, leading to a substantial revision of the original mining concept (David, I–NGO). In this context, protest emerges as a particularly effective mechanism for eliciting turnout and influence, with some respondents describing it as the only way to compel institutional responsiveness outside of electoral cycles.

Survey respondents

Results of the quantitative survey among the residents of Bor and Majdanpek indicate certain alignments with, as well as differences from, what the interviewees stated. Contrary to interviewees' observation that the public interest is not important to citizens, the largest share of respondents (34%) cited a desire to improve their community as a motivation for participating. The second most frequently mentioned motivation among citizens (27%) — being personally impacted by the problem — corresponds to the concern highlighted by interviewees, indicating that the issue they noted is also acknowledged by the residents. A discouraging finding is that a considerable share of respondents (25%) reported that nothing motivates them to participate, which resonates with the low turnout noticed by the interviewees but also by the respondents. Less than 10% of respondents took part in public review procedures, and nearly 40% reported either being unaware of their existence or unwilling to participate even if informed.

Survey results confirm interviewees' observations that personal affectedness is a key driver of citizen engagement. Quantitative analysis shows that citizens' concerns are primarily shaped by direct experience and personal affectedness. A statistically significant relationship was found between place of residence and perceived community problems ($\chi^2(15) = 72.184$, $p = 0.001$): the urban residents of Bor predominantly emphasised environmental problems due to continuous exposure to industrial pollution, while the rural residents of Bor were more concerned about displacement, reflecting the direct impact on several surveyed villages. In rural areas of Majdanpek, communal issues emerged as the primary concern, likely linked to long–term infrastructural neglect and limited public investment.

4.2 INFORMATIVENESS

Interview respondents

Inadequate public information and the incomprehensibility of the information provided to citizens are highlighted as significant causes of low public participation. Issues of information and lack of awareness regarding plan preparation processes and opportunities for participation were identified primarily by spatial planners, and subsequently by actors from other sectors, including the representatives of mining companies. The problem is identified both in the channels through which information is disseminated and in the lack of willingness to invest additional effort in informing the public through alternative means. In contrast, governmental bodies tend to frame access to information differently.

As one planner notes, *In Germany, official notifications are delivered to people's home addresses, while here only those who work for the City Hall are informed (Ramona, p&r)*.

This institutionalised narrowness of outreach is further illustrated by another respondent who points to the almost complete absence of active communication with local communities:

> *How are they supposed to get informed? Have you ever seen someone talking in public about a plan? No. The radio does not talk about it. There is no loudspeaker going through the village. So how are they supposed to find out? (...) We simply have no touch with them [citizens] (Mirela, p&p).*

Regarding the lack of information, planners are particularly critical of the role of local authorities. According to some, local authorities are the actors that should bear responsibility for informing the local public about plans and ways of engaging in participatory processes. The problem is diagnosed in *the passivity of local authorities, because when they see that a spatial plan out of their [local] jurisdiction is being developed, they simply do not get involved and only participate formally in the process (Nolan, p&r)*. They particularly emphasise the lack of direct, *one-on-one* communication with residents:

> *People are not worked with directly. No one goes to the grassroots level, to local community offices, and tells the head of the local community to organise people and explain what is important in the plan for them (Mirela, p&p); Has anyone actually asked people what they really want in their settlement... what kind of school they want, what kind of cultural centre? (Mirela, p&p).*

Other planners emphasise that passivity stems from fear among lower levels of authority: *they talk about wanting participation, but they do not implement it as an administration, and they are loyal and kept on a 'short leash' in terms of obedience and how these things are done; there is hesitation and mistrust, and they believe that decisions are made elsewhere — Belgrade makes decisions instead of them (Ramona, p&r)*.

Planners see their own role as active in communicating with citizens in the field, but they do not consider informing the community to be their responsibility, nor do they believe that plan developers have the necessary capacity for this:

> *we come to the field, whether a plan is being developed or a public inspection is underway, we hold public presentations, explain to people what is happening, what the planning solutions are, and what the impacts will be. It is easy to explain it to them and easy for them to comprehend. There is no one else to explain it to them except us, and as plan developers, we simply cannot cover everything (Nolan, p&r).*

However, some planners frame non–information as a matter of personal choice rather than a structural constraint. One planner reflects:

> *In mining basin areas, it's questionable how much residents share information among themselves. These are peri-urban or rural areas where people have less access to information than in cities, they don't mingle around much, they don't use social networks to any extent, they don't know where to find the right information, so they're simply not informed on time (Jelisaveta, p&p).*

Some indicate citizens' unrealistic expectations that the state will inform them, shaped by the legacy of socialism: *Someone has to explain to them that the state is not*

taking care of them... If that is missing, the result is — there are no interested individuals to participate (Blanka, p&r).

However, representatives of a mining company pointed directly to structural shortcomings when interpreting non–information. One of them notes:

> *There is no state strategy for the development of mining in relation to spatial planning (...). People were distrustful of the state because the state did not provide timely clarification or information about its plans, the company's plans, or the reasons behind all of this. I think the state, its institutions, failed the most here (Mladen, mc).*

Nevertheless, responsibility for informing the citizens is still shifted away from the mining company itself: *No company will invest too much in explaining things to the local community; their priority is production — increasing production and ensuring maximum profit (Mladen, mc).*

Non–information is interpreted by the NGO sector as the result of an absence of intent on the part of the competent actors.

> *Rarely does anyone, except perhaps some fanatic, go to the city's website daily... Information is indeed the key problem (Iris, n-NGO); The very idea of publishing something in the Official Gazette or on a website — who even goes to the website? Or in Kurir[2]. Please, don't. That's really beneath [any minimum effort that could be expected]. It is simply clear to people from the outset that no one actually wanted to inform them about it, rather it's just whoever happens to hear about it (Anita, n-NGO).*

As another respondent explained: *When information is not published on a website or in daily newspapers that are anyway rarely read or followed in villages, and when people do not travel to the city or check notice boards at City Hall, and are absent from public forums, or when invited individuals fail to pass information on to their neighbours — or are simply not interested in participating — the result is that residents are not at all present at public hearings (David, l-NGO).*

Respondents are critical of attempts to shift responsibility for public notification from the state to citizens and the civil sector: *Responsibility for whether citizens are informed or not lies with the competent authority (...). It is not my job, as an ordinary villager, to deal with this (Manfred, n-NGO); We do not have the capacity to organise citizens, nor is that our job (David, l-NGO).*

In contrast, a state–level governmental representative sees it differently. In Goran's point of view, citizens do have sufficient access to information, but are selectively or inadequately exposed to it: *Citizens have the opportunity to inform themselves; they are informed. Sometimes someone informs them in a one-sided way — only about the negative sides, not the positive ones.*

Similarly, when citizens report not being informed on time, their explanations are attributed to personal priorities rather than systemic issues: *No one is excluded, there*

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[2] Kurir is a daily newspaper with a reputation for sensationalist ('yellow') reporting.

is only the impression that they aren't informed on time. But when they explain why, they say they don't have time to go to the local administration office, read websites, track updates, etc. (Goran, ng).

However, the representatives of local authorities share their first–hand experience, emphasising both willingness and capacity constraints. They stress a genuine commitment to expanding the reach of information and involving a broader segment of the public in planning–related procedures, while simultaneously pointing to limited institutional capacities. As Kira explains, *A very small number of people are doing a large number of tasks. Within our working hours, there is simply no room to devote more attention to an issue beyond what is legally prescribed.*

Additional efforts to disseminate information through alternative channels are framed as an individual act rather than an institutionalised practice: *In this case, posting on the municipality's Facebook page was more a matter of goodwill (...), we did it voluntarily and simply did not have the resources to influence visibility or promotion (Kira, lg).*

Despite these limitations, the respondent underscores the importance of encouraging public involvement, noting that *it was important to us that people participate and continue to take part in such procedures, because ultimately the direction in which these processes develop depends on all of us (Kira, lg).*

Survey respondents

The fact that most citizens are unfamiliar with even the names of participation procedures — such as early public review and public review — points to substantial shortcomings in the informativeness of the participatory framework. Citizens' lack of awareness is evident, as confirmed by the quantitative survey: around 74% of respondents rated their knowledge of development plans as non–existent or very poor, 22% as well–informed, and only around 4% as very well–informed. An open–ended question revealed that most residents rely on the internet and social media as primary information channels. Notably, consistent with interviewees' observations, roughly 22% reported not actively seeking information, giving answers such as *nowhere, I have no source,* or *I am not interested*. However, this share of 22% is far from supporting the claim that a majority is uninterested.

Non–transparency was also reflected in residents' responses, with remarks such as *plans are not available, they are posted and quickly removed from the municipal website* and *we had to inquire about everything ourselves at the urban planning office*. Where official information is lacking, people often rely on informal social networks[3] to stay informed. When citizens were asked — through an open–ended question — to suggest ways to improve public awareness of participation in spatial and urban planning processes, almost one–third of respondents did not provide an answer, highlighting limited engagement and a gap between the criticism of non–transparency and the ability to propose concrete improvements.

[3] Encompassing parents, children, acquaintances, friends, colleagues, shop assistants, cleaners, neighbours, social circles, a husband who is a journalist, a wife working for the City/Municipality, activists, other residents, people "around the village" and those at the green market.

4.3 EXCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Interviewee respondents

Representatives of the NGO sector pointed out that poor stakeholder information might not be accidental, but rather a deliberate strategy of the state sector. They emphasise that citizens do not participate in plan development, not because they are unwilling, but because they cannot — the public is systematically excluded. *Most often, the local population is excluded until the phase when they see the excavator (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Structural exclusion of the public is also reflected in the choice of venues where participation is organised: *It always happens centrally, in one venue, where there is often no one [to offer professional support and plan interpretation] (Iris, n-NGO).*

Interviewees stress the need to organise public reviews in local community spaces: *It really is not impossible to organise a public review at the location where the plan actually takes place. Padinska Skela[4] cannot have a public review on 27th March Street[5], because people simply cannot get to the city centre during working hours and working days to see the plan (Iris, n-NGO).*

As a core systemic obstacle, they identify the formalism and minimalism of early public review and public review procedures. As one interviewee noted: *The problem is that, as a rule, the competent authority uses exclusively those minimal methods of informing the public, (...) the law does not prohibit the competent authority or the plan developers from identifying the interested public and specific groups or individuals, but this never happens (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Similarly, David emphasises that *Our mandatory methods of informing citizens are not a solution... [The participation procedures are] formalised and short.* NGO interviewees share the impression that participation in practice is often carried out at a level below even the legally prescribed minimum, merely to satisfy procedural form, without any substantive intention to involve citizens. As one respondent put it: *This is all formal compliance, without any intention for it to actually have an effect. It's more like: here, we have fulfilled our legal obligation (Anita, n-NGO).*

One interviewee described what they termed an extreme case: *A forceful example is that a second public presentation was scheduled in Belgrade, in the Government building, at 8:00 AM, and it was announced that very morning in Kurir. That is administrative viciousness. This is how trust is permanently lost (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Other examples referred to systematic procedural abuses, *such as excluding the early public review phase and shortening procedures (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Similar logic was described in the context of local budgeting: *If a municipal budget is being adopted, it is formally announced — according to the law — the next day at 12:00 PM in the large hall of City Hall that there will be a public hearing on*

[4] A settlement in the administrative area of the City of Belgrade, about 20 km from the city centre.

[5] Address of the City of Belgrade Secretariat of Urban Planning and Construction.

the budget. Do you know who appears at the event? Nobody! But the form has been fulfilled (...) (Radek, l-NGO).

Another way in which participatory procedures are hollowed out is through scheduling during vacation and holiday seasons:

> *This past summer, in July and August, we had ten plans that were in early public review or public review within one or over two weeks. This also happens during winter holidays, when such plans are scheduled... (Iris, n-NGO).*

In response to the question as to who is excluded from the process, NGO respondents mostly state that the public as such is excluded. *It is no longer a question of excluding a particular group... I think that the entire public is completely excluded from participation (Anita, n-NGO).*

The risk of further excluding the public through the introduction of e–participation is recognised:

> *Do you remember the proposed policy to take everything online? There was one paragraph that was actually the most dangerous, and I think it also relates, among other things, to mining areas: it stated that people who are not on the territory directly affected by the plan — that is, who do not live or work there — have no right to decide on it. That would mean, in the case of Košutnjak and Makiš[6] in relation to Belgrade, as well as in other areas, that you are completely excluding the public from the decision-making process (Anita, n-NGO).*

The government attitude towards territorial exclusion is that public engagement is relevant only for localised, narrow interests, not for matters of "public interest" and "state policy". This narrowing of (a minimal level of) participation is reinforced in calls for establishing a stricter "legal legitimacy" for participants: *Legal legitimacy in market conditions means property rights holders... those are the people who should be listened to. Others who look at this from the outside, who comment... (Goran, ng)* are seen as non–legitimate. In the view of public interest, planners see public participation in an early review process as redundant and rather as an obstacle that *burdens the planning team* (Blanka, p&r; Nolan, p&r), especially in the context of mining areas, *because mining is a core sector of the national economy of a country and does not depend on whether we want it or not, but rather on whether we have raw materials or not. The issue is not whether mining will be developed, but whether resources will be used (Nolan, p&r).*

In this case, the local population is understood as a passive object of planning rather than an active participant. They should participate in the process, but their role should be limited to providing information, rather than exercising decision–making authority on an equal footing with other actors:

[6] Košutnjak is a protected green area in Belgrade, often referred to as the "lungs of the city." Makiš is a water supply plain in Belgrade. Both are considered to have regional significance for air quality and the water supply system, thus exceeding purely local interests. As a forest and an alluvial plain, these areas are almost uninhabited.

> *You cannot mine there unless you relocate them [the local population]. You have to talk to them. If you have settlements, agricultural production, watercourses, or water in a given area, you cannot even consider mining there unless you first conduct an economic analysis of that population. What will it mean for that population? (Mirela, p&p).*

Going back to the state government's views on exclusiveness in participation, Goran agrees that early public review could be more appropriate for urban than spatial planning. Furthermore, in the current context, exclusion from participation processes does not appear to be a structural issue but an individual choice: *We've come to a situation where people who want to understand — understand and participate; and people who want to criticise — criticise as much as possible without looking at the whole picture (Goran, ng).*

Similarly, another national government representative states: *If everyone followed what is defined in the Law on Strategic Environmental Assessment, there would be no obstacles for anyone to be included or allowed to contribute if they want to (Silvia, ng).*

Survey respondents

The exclusivity in formal decision–making, observed by the interviewees, is reflected in the low participation of residents, as confirmed by local citizens in Bor and Majdanpek (Figure 1). Awareness and engagement remain limited, with only ca. 4% of respondents reporting participation in the early public review and 7% in the public review. The lack of both past participation and expressed willingness to engage among nearly two–thirds of respondents, particularly in the early public review, indicates the generally low participatory potential of the local population. It also indicates issues related to the meaningfulness of the early public review in its current form.

The findings of the quantitative survey are consistent with the views of NGO representatives: citizens do not participate in plan preparations not because they are unwilling, but because they are unable to — public engagement is systematically excluded. Most residents are willing to dedicate time to participate in the creation of planning documents. Specifically, the majority (ca. 66%) are willing to dedicate as much time as necessary or at least several hours. Only 15% are not willing to dedicate any time at all. Similarly, lack of time does not emerge as a dominant reason for non–participation.

Interviewees also highlighted the timing of public reviews as part of an exclusive strategy that effectively excludes a large portion of the public. The quantitative survey confirmed this, showing that only a third of respondents (34%) stated that the time of day was irrelevant, while the majority preferred time slots outside of working hours (Figure 2).

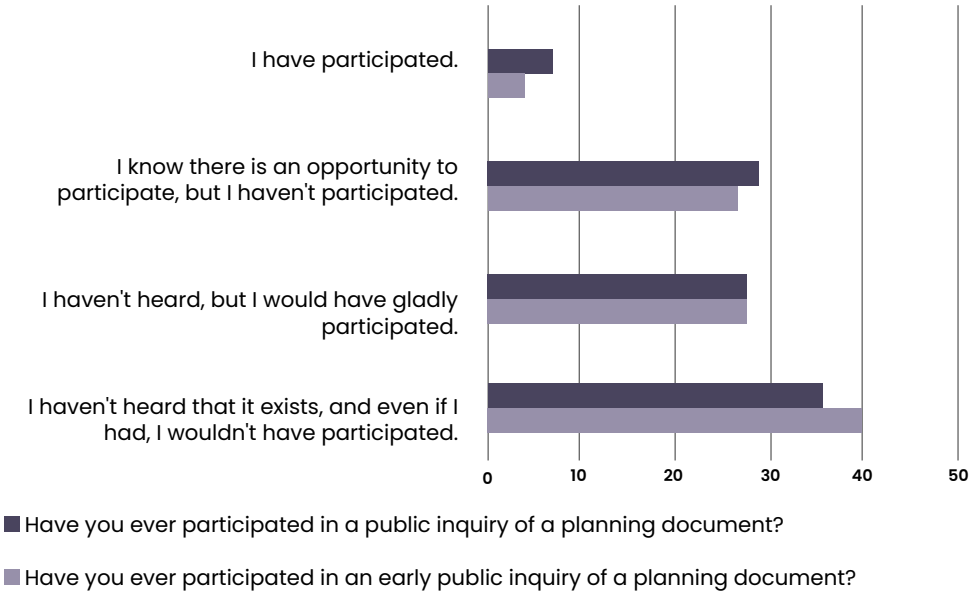

Figure 1. Participation of the local population in the development of planning documents

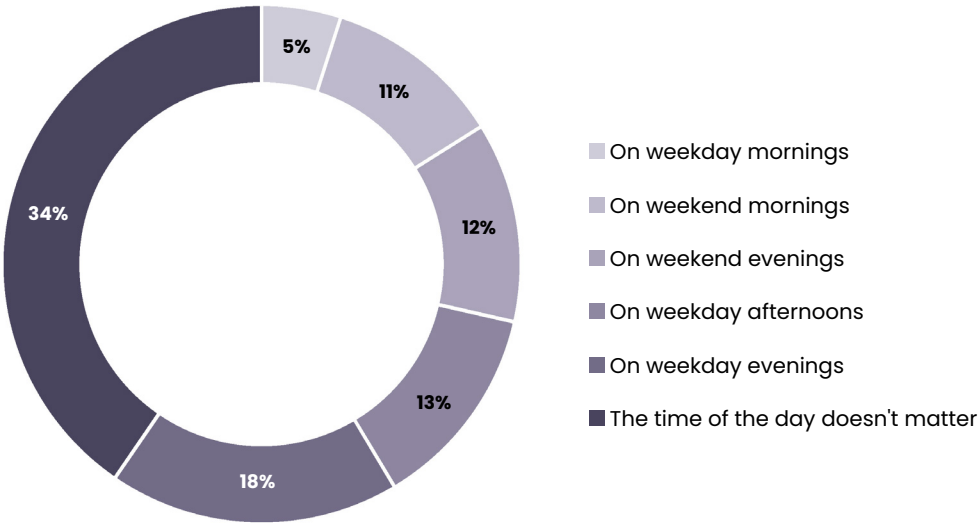

Figure 2. Preferred time for citizens to attend public meetings or events

4.4 UNDERSTANDING TASKS AND JURISDICTIONS

Interview respondents

NGO respondents, countering the notion that participation is solely a matter of individual choice, highlight that participatory procedures are ill–suited to ordinary citizens, which can deter their involvement in planning. *The public review, in its current form, is not adapted to laypeople... People simply cannot understand it (Manfred, n-NGO).*

In addition to the use of highly technical language in addressing the public, interviewees emphasise the problem of graphic presentation formats that average computer users cannot access, as high–resolution map files often require specialised software. Procedures designed in this way deepen the already pronounced asymmetry of power between authorities, experts, and lay citizens. This represents, as one respondent described it, *the manifestation of this terribly unequal power relationship (Iris, n-NGO).*

This imbalance is further exacerbated by the inappropriate behaviour of plan developers and commissions during public reviews:

> *Most often, they behave inappropriately and impolitely towards participants and do not help them in exercising their rights; on the contrary, they try to deprive them of those rights through manipulation and very often through threats. We have witnessed municipal officials coming in and interrupting a session (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Planners agree that planning documents, especially those at the strategic level, are difficult for "ordinary" citizens to read. They acknowledge their own responsibility and the need to adapt professional terminology to lay audiences and to the goal of encouraging participation:

> *The larger the scale (...), the clearer it is to them, and they more easily recognise their personal interest, especially when it concerns a specific plot of land, compared to a general urban plan or a spatial plan for a special-purpose area. It is up to the planner in charge to find a way to bring the plan closer to them [citizens] through images, games, or graphics, showing what the plan is about. We are often lulled into our own professional world, terminology, and ways of thinking, and we do not think about whether we are clear to others (Ramona, p&r).*

Some planners stress that citizens' limited expertise is problematic, placing the responsibility on planners to enhance their understanding: *general objections are submitted incorrectly, often by certain NGOs and institutions, etc. They challenge the plan in an unprofessional and superficial way, and therefore the objections are always rejected (Nolan, p&r); It is questionable what they are even talking about. What they say usually later becomes the subject of objections that we dismiss as unfounded, because they do not actually relate to what we are doing [in terms of planners' jurisdictions]. This shows that even those who are interested [to participate] do not have even minimal knowledge of what spatial and urban plans are and what the scope of spatial and urban planning is (Zara, p&r).*

While some see incompetence in formulating objections as the reason for their rejection, other experts stress that responsibility lies in how plans are communicated to citizens:

> *I think citizens are capable of recognising a higher public interest, however we might call it, if it is presented to them in the right way, especially when it concerns their local community. I think what demotivates them is the lack of feedback (Neli, p&r).*

The experiences of local authorities also point to the problem of understanding the plans: *... citizens still do not know what planning is and how it is conducted... They most often do not even understand the basic idea of the plan itself. (...) The majority of citizens do not engage with matters that are actually related to planning... (Davina, lg).*

At the same time, planners point to responsibility within the educational system, emphasising that even within their own profession, there is insufficient information and knowledge about public participation in planning. Often, *they are not even aware that this is something they should be doing — not even spatial planners, let alone the wider public (Zara, p&r), while even urban planning students are not sufficiently skilled to formulate objections to a plan] in any way, let alone in the proper way (Zara, p&r),* pointing to the need to introduce dedicated courses at the university on the importance of participation in spatial planning.

> *There is resistance within the profession as well. To implement this in practice, you need knowledge; it is not just about skills. You need to know what you want to achieve, and then adapt the techniques to your goals (Ramona, p&r).*

Several interviewees highlighted the prevalence of "office–based planners" reluctant to interact with citizens: *I can do everything from satellite images and data in my computer — I don't need the field. Talking to people is exhausting (Blanka, p&r).*

Survey respondents

Among the reasons for not participating in the process of creating planning documents, as we will see in the next section, the prevailing factor is citizens' lack of trust in their ability to effect change. However, as shown in Figure 3, a small percentage of citizens (11%) adopt a self–reflective approach and cite a lack of expertise as a barrier to participation. These findings suggest that before undertaking any public education initiatives, local actors — and particularly the state — face an even more challenging task: building citizens'trust in the functioning of institutions.

Furthermore, citizens' views on issues of competencies and responsibilities can be inferred indirectly from the suggestions they made to improve participatory methods, as the aspects they seek to enhance reveal what they currently perceive as missing in existing participation procedures. Citizens address the exclusivity in planning document creation as a challenge. Nearly half did not respond, which indicates that they do not feel competent in the field. The rest proposed direct e–government voting, financial incentives, consideration of citizens' remarks, and clear, transparent communication. In general, they pointed to the need to depoliticise the authorities and restore trust, along with raising awareness and motivating people to engage.

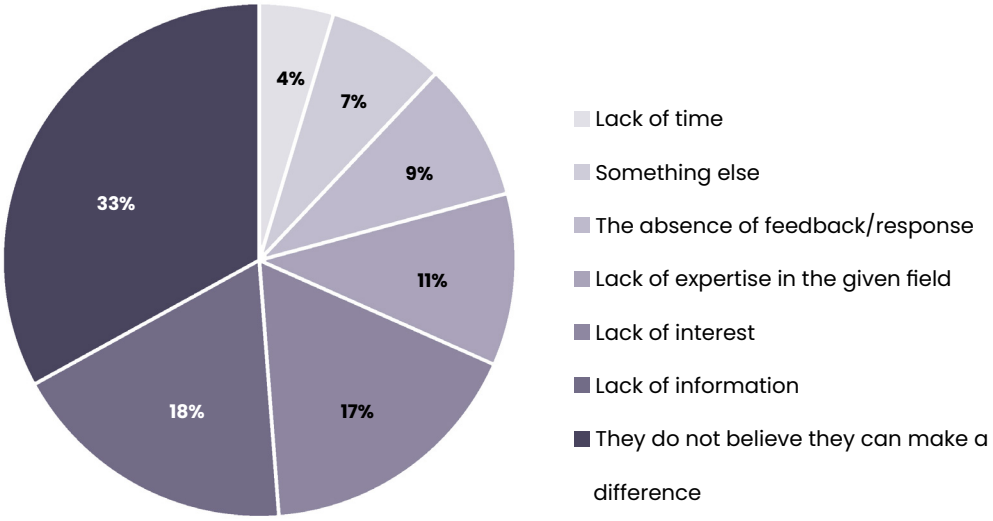

Figure 3. Key reasons for low participation in the planning document creation process

4.5 TRUST AND FEEDBACK

Interview respondents

Interpreting the reasons for public non–participation, representatives of the civil sector primarily point to a deep distrust in the state, which they see as a direct product of how formal participation has been practised.

> *The lack of trust is very strong, and it then very quickly turns into conflict (Iris, n-NGO); This is a distrust that has built up over decades. Citizens have little trust in the system. Even if someone were to come and say, 'everything will be fine, don't worry,' they would not believe the authorities, because on several previous occasions things were not O.K. (Manfred, n-NGO).*

Distrust is caused by a range of structural factors, but what dominates is the perception that no one wants to truly include citizens, and that participation is just a veneer: *Things are always done according to the principle of 'whatever little Perica*[7] *put into the plan is what will be implemented next year'. Then it gets wrapped up and presented as if there had been a public debate, even though there isn't a single 'p' of a public debate. It will be said that everything has been fulfilled, while in fact nothing has been fulfilled. Unfortunately, there is no real public and no broad participation of the citizens (Radek, l-NGO).*

From the point of view of the NGO sector, the absence of an institutional response to comments submitted during the early public review phase, i.e. the lack of feedback, is the most salient limitation. As one respondent explained:

[7] Little Peter, a stereotypical character in Serbian jokes, commonly portrayed as naïve or unintelligent.

We are well-intentioned, and we provide constructive comments. We try to formulate them in a way that planners can easily incorporate into a decision or document. (...) Most often we receive no response whatsoever to these comments (David, l-NGO).

Even in cases where respondents receive confirmation that comments have been received, the lack of substantive feedback remains a major problem: *We were not told what was accepted and what was not... Notification that the comments were received and forwarded to the planners means nothing (David, l-NGO)*. Interviewees emphasise that this problem is twofold, *because it leaves people in a state of uncertainty and with the belief that no one has even looked at what they did (Anita, n-NGO)*. Other respondents note that when replies are provided, they are often dismissive: *The most common responses are: 'this is not the subject of the plan,' 'this was the subject of another discussion', etc. (Manfred, n-NGO)*.

Interestingly, mining companies and some planners approach the issue of trust from a very different perspective, expressing suspicion towards stakeholders involved in participation processes. A representative of a mining company articulated deep mistrust towards protest or mobilisation, noting: *When the public got involved and problems appeared, it looked 'directed' from somewhere — someone with personal, not public interests, initiated it (Serhio, mc)*. Such views suggest an underlying delegitimisation of public participation through collective action. When asked why citizens who actively mobilise against mining projects do not participate in formal procedures, respondents

Table 2. Evaluation matrix of the contributions of major actors in addressing problems caused by mining activities (%)

Source: Authors.

ACTORS	NO CONTRIBUTION	SMALL CONTRIBUTION	NEITHER A SMALL NOR A LARGE CONTRIBUTION	LARGE CONTRIBUTION	VERY LARGE CONTRIBUTION
State	52.0	21.5	15.1	7.7	3.7
Local government	56.0	19.5	16.8	6.0	1.7
Private companies	59.6	20.5	15.5	3.4	1.0
NGOs	64.0	13.4	16.2	3.7	2.7
Experts and the scientific community	67.0	14.5	14.8	3.0	0.7
European Union	66.9	17.9	11.8	3.4	0.0
Citizens (local activism)	34.9	27.8	22.0	12.6	2.7

admitted they did not have a clear explanation: *It's not that people are inactive — they point out problems — but participation itself is missing, and I'm not sure why (Blanka, p&r)*. This selective engagement is interpreted ambivalently by officials, some of whom express suspicion towards sudden mobilisations: *If stakeholders get involved only when the plan is about to be adopted, I can't help but wonder why (Blanka, p&r)*. Blanka also extends this scepticism to civil society, describing NGO–driven initiatives as *very one-sided*.

Survey respondents

Observations made by civil society representatives regarding citizens' lack of trust in the state and other relevant institutions are confirmed by several responses in the quantitative research conducted with citizens. Nearly one–third of respondents, as previously noted (Figure 3), cite the belief that they cannot make a difference as a reason for not participating in the creation of planning documents. The absence of feedback, which is particularly recognised as a problem by the NGO sector, is also acknowledged by citizens, although only 9% identify it as a reason for non–participation. Many of the responses provided by citizens under the open–ended option "other" (7%) point precisely to a lack of trust in key actors, including *feelings of powerlessness against profit-driven, self-interested stakeholders, distrust in authorities, local and national, and a lack of local authorities' interest in involving citizens in planning*, among others.

Distrust in key actors is further evident in responses to the question *How often does the local population feel that local authorities consider their suggestions?* More than half of respondents (54%) answered *never*, followed by *rarely* (31%) and *sometimes* (10%). Only an insignificant share of respondents perceive that their suggestions are taken into account, with 3% answering *often* and less than 1% *always*. Distrust among the local populations of Bor and Majdanpek, both towards the state and other key actors, is also visible in the evaluation of key actors' contributions to addressing problems caused by mining activities (Table 2).

5. DISCUSSION

Our analysis of participation in spatial planning processes in Serbia demonstrates that residents' willingness and motivation to engage are central to understanding participatory dynamics. This aligns with Verba et al.'s (1995) civic voluntarism model, which emphasises that participation depends not only on formal opportunities but also on citizens' motivation, resources, and external mobilisation. Low turnout in formal procedures thus reflects not a lack of civic interest but a rational response to limited perceived efficacy and structural constraints, such as short deadlines, inaccessible documentation, and asymmetries of power between experts and citizens (Olson, 1965; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). However, many aspects of public participation depend on both citizens' willingness to engage as well as the readiness of governmental institutions to implement systemic changes (Nikolić et al., 2021).

Institutional actors frequently interpret low participation as a consequence of citizens' disinterest or individualism, effectively shifting responsibility onto the public (Lawton & Macaulay, 2014). Our findings confirm that this narrative obscures a deeper structural barrier: planning procedures often prioritise legal compliance over substantive engagement, particularly in mining–affected regions where state interests are viewed as predetermined. Such patterns correspond with Arnstein's (1969) lower rungs of participation, where informing and consultation remain symbolic rather than empowering.

Public awareness is closely linked to motivation. Consistent with the literature on participatory governance, awareness of participatory mechanisms is a prerequisite for engagement (Fung, 2006; Pantić et al., 2021). Our study reveals that formal communication channels — such as official gazettes, websites, and centrally located notice boards — fail to mobilise citizens, particularly in rural areas. Citizens' limited knowledge of early public review or public review procedures confirms that lack of information, rather than apathy, drives low participation

In addition to awareness, the ability to comprehend planning documents shapes both the quality and perceived relevance of engagement. Complex spatial plans, technical jargon, and inaccessible graphic formats reinforce power asymmetries and discourage participation (Healey, 1997; Innes & Booher, 2010). While some planners attribute rejected objections to citizens' incompetence, our findings suggest that institutional responsibility lies in adapting communication, clarifying jurisdictions, and enabling residents to recognise both the relevance of plans and their own role in planning processes.

Finally, trust and feedback emerge as critical determinants of sustainable participation. Consistent with Ansell & Gash (2008) and Quick & Bryson (2022), our results show that the absence of substantive responses to citizen input undermines trust and external efficacy. The lack of trust constitutes a significant factor behind non–participation, particularly in light of comparative evidence from the European Social Survey showing that Serbia stands out from other countries in exhibiting predominantly pessimistic attitudes towards political institutions (Janković & Toković, 2021). Long–term disengagement and low turnout reflect participants' rational assessment that contributions are unlikely to influence outcomes, reinforcing perception gaps between institutions and citizens.

Taken together, these findings underscore persistent misalignments between citizens' experiences and institutional expectations, echoing studies on perception gaps in collaborative governance (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Lawton & Macaulay, 2014). Bridging these gaps requires moving beyond procedural compliance towards participatory approaches that actively cultivate motivation, ensure awareness, enhance understanding, and institutionalise feedback. Without such interventions, participation risks remaining a formal exercise that reproduces distrust, diminishes legitimacy, and limits the transformative potential of spatial planning.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the dynamics of public participation in spatial planning in Serbia, especially in sensitive mining–affected regions, highlighting the interplay between citizens' motivation, awareness, comprehension, and trust, as well as understanding the misalignments between citizens' and institutions' perceptions, with special emphasis on mining areas. The analysis revealed that low turnout in formal participatory procedures is not simply a matter of civic disinterest but the result of structural barriers, procedural formalism, limited accessibility of information, and entrenched power asymmetries. Citizens often perceive participation as symbolic, while institutions frequently interpret low engagement as apathy, creating persistent perception gaps that undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of planning processes.

Key factors shaping participation include residents' willingness and motivation, the accessibility and clarity of planning information, citizens' understanding of spatial planning tasks and jurisdictions, and the presence of feedback mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that meaningful participation emerges only when individuals are informed, able to comprehend planning content, and confident that their input will be acknowledged and considered. Conversely, the absence of feedback and transparency fosters distrust, discouraging engagement and reinforcing inequalities in decision–making.

The study also highlights that no single actor is solely responsible for the observed challenges. Authorities and planners can improve communication, adapt participatory methods, and provide timely, comprehensible information. NGOs can support outreach, capacity building, and the mobilisation of underrepresented groups. Importantly, citizens' ability to participate effectively also depends on education — both formal, through the public education system, and non–formal, through community learning and awareness initiatives. Citizens, in turn, need to be open to acquiring knowledge about planning processes and their own potential role within them. Effective participation thus requires a collaborative approach, where each actor recognises both the limitations and the potential of their role in enhancing planning processes.

Overall, this research underscores the need for a more inclusive, transparent, and responsive participatory framework in spatial planning. By addressing structural barriers, fostering trust, and integrating feedback, it is possible to bridge perception gaps and strengthen citizen engagement. This is especially important in areas with resource extraction, where tensions are present due to the strong economic benefits of mining, but also significant negative socio–environmental impacts that need to be balanced for the common good. The findings suggest that, with concerted effort, all stakeholders — authorities, planners, NGOs, and residents — can collectively contribute to enhancing participatory practices, making spatial planning more democratic, effective, and socially responsive.

Future research should extend this analysis through longitudinal studies examining how trust, motivation, and turnout evolve, particularly in regions undergoing intensive

socio–economic transformation due to resource extraction. Comparative studies across other mining–affected or post–socialist contexts would also help determine whether the identified perception gaps are structurally embedded or context–specific. Moreover, experimental research testing innovative participatory formats — such as deliberative workshops, digital engagement platforms, or feedback–tracking mechanisms — could provide empirical evidence on how to move beyond procedural formalism. From a practical perspective, pilot innovation initiatives that combine institutional reform, participatory capacity–building, and civic education may offer promising pathways to strengthening democratic governance in spatial planning.

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