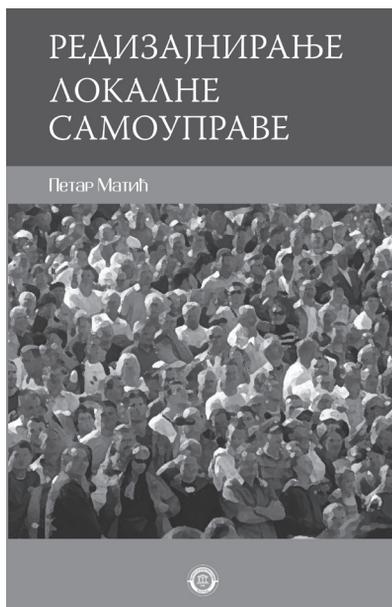


Aleksandra Mirović
Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade

Institutional Design of Local Self-Government in The Function of Strengthening The Political Subjectivity of Citizens

Petar Matić

Redesigning local self-government: Theoretical and comparative framework for modernisation of the local self-government in Serbia (Redizajniranje lokalne samouprave: Teorijski i uporedni okvir za modernizaciju lokalne samouprave u Srbiji), Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade, 2012, 168 p.



As the modern time has shown, through practical experience as well as through numerous studies, institutional design in the field of local self-government has significant, both direct and indirect, developmental implications for the political system, as a very important sub-system of the global social system, and for the society as a whole. Therefore, it is not surprising that reactualisation and revitalisation of these issues is in the focus of attention of contemporary politicological and related studies, as well as the wider public discourses. By paraphrasing a part of John Keane's work, we may even

say that, in our contemporaneity, not only has the term itself been revitalised, but also the language of the local self-government,¹ in particular the striking and manifesting being the revitalisation of the talk of related decentralisation. This, among other things, is also the consequence of decentralisation in that area of vertical division of power being treated nowadays as the European and, in general, as the democratic standard par excellence, so its implementation is inevitably being taken as a test of democraticity. We are witnessing that, within the global revitalisation of the decentralisation subject, the talk of regionalisation, as one of its specific form, has particularly become popular in the Serbian society. Namely, we can notice that lately, frequently and from different sides – be it political, civil and social, and even scientific, various projects, i.e. regionalisation models are being presented, some of them less and the others more interesting, realistic and applicable, some even have potentially dangerous implications considering already existing social cleavages in the Serbian society, and, at the same time, some of them are also completely opposed and often

only in the function of political marketing.

All of this more than clearly shows that the academic monograph we have in our hands thematically fits the current moment, and that the author, Petar Matić, has thus found himself on the line of one of the crucial politicological trends of our time. In addition to these compliments for the actuality, or the shown keen sense for the selection of what is now called the timing for dealing with a certain thematic, the author's style deserves special compliments and it provides him, in literary terminology, with positive criticism only. The simplicity of his academic expression and more specifically his skillfulness to set out a large quantity of empirical details and information belonging to often complicated comparative, political, legal and normative practice, offered in this book, not only makes it a clear and understandable reading material for the wider audience, but also makes its reading simply flow.

In respect of the metodological and theoretical matrix underpinning this research undertaking, we can conclude that a combined approach has been used within neo-institutionalism, which today is an almost unavoidable, very modern and dominant course in the modern political science. It is

1 Keane speaks of „reviving the language of civil society“. See: Džon Kin (2003) *Civilno društvo: Stare slike, nove vizije*, Beograd: Filip Višnjić. p. 11.

a combination of constructivist on the one side, and sociological i.e. normative, and historical neo-institutionalism on the other. We particularly wish to emphasize that we share this methodological and theoretical position with Matić, and that it is therefore easier for us to understand and properly interpret the author's methodological standpoint and academic goals he pursues by this research. Namely, it is our common belief that constructivism in itself, and institutional design as such – in terms of some artificial creation of institutions, according to an institutional construction project given or set in advance – cannot meet the criteria of functionality and effectiveness in a specific society (*societas*). As without taking into consideration the existing system of social values, or those areas from which it is generated, such as: tradition, historical legacy and rooted social patterns, institutionalisation comes down to mere inoculation of institutional solutions, with little or no chance of success. It is important, however, to point out in here what is often overlooked, and to some extent it seems overlooked in this monograph as well, at least in its explicit level – that, in addition to acknowledging already existing social values, there is a basic need

(especially in the societies going through the process of democratisation or even democratic consolidation) to incorporate, in the process of institutional designing, a designed system of values as well, therefore those preferred but still unfounded or insufficiently developed social norms that should be the subject of socialisation and individual interiorisation. It means that the prospective role of the process of institutional designing is needed as well, if the aim is that it has not only evolutionary and innovative sign, but the effect too. Usually, under institutional design we understand the process of modelling, designing, testing and creating institutions which, in the most general sense and by a certain working definition used in this study, represent „established 'game rules, formal and/or informal, through which different stakeholders, individual or collective, act in a system“²

In any case, however, the author's orientation to the sociological approach towards the new institutionalism and giving the key role to that normative i.e. the value dimension is clear. It is witnessed by the fact that a special section in the book is dedicated to that approach, its significance and contribution to the research and building of institutions, both those

2 Petar Matić (2012) *Redizajniranje lokalne samouprave*, Beograd: Institut za političke studije. p. 39.

at the general level and those at the level of local self-government.³ In the case of institutional building of the local self-government, Matic finds that particular importance of sociological discourse within neo-institutionalism is reflected in that the local institutions, closest to the citizens, can most easily respond to their needs. In order to fulfill their purpose, the local institutions, however have to be harmonised with the system of values in the local communities. This, in our opinion, highly important part of a monographic study, gives us also a very useful determination and differentiation of the process of institutionalisation which, as the author notices himself, is in the centre of sociological institutionalism. Starting from Huntington's determination of the institutionalisation process as a general process of the evolution of institutions, the process by which „the old institutions change and disappear, and the new institutions replace them“⁴ Matic formulates his own, much more precise and useful definition ac-

ording to which „institutionalisation is the process through which relevant rules and norms within a society blend into the system of institutions and become universally valid principles“⁵. Further on, due attention has been paid to distinguishing the concept of institutionalisation from the concept of modernisation which, as we can notice, becomes similar and related to the former exactly in the context of the above-mentioned Huntington's determination. Relying on Schmucl Eisenstadt's differentiation, it is pointed out that, unlike modernisation characterised by evolvability, institutionalisation is just a certain form of political development, which is not necessarily evolutionary nor exclusively a part of the wider modernisation processes.

Finally, there is another moment indicating the author's preference of normative and historical institutionalism. It is the fact that the author, in his comparative analyses of different institutional models from the empirical field of important political systems existing today, systematically always leaving the space to examine the possibilities of their application in Serbia (which also shows a very good structuring of the study itself), is trying to filter some of their important aspects and in-

3 See: *Ibid.*, chapter: „New theoretical models in studying local institutions“, pp. 29-43; in particular see section: „Sociological and historical institutionalism“, pp. 38-40.

4 Samuel Huntington (1986) "Political Development and Political Decay ". In: Kabashima, Ikuo and White, Lynn (eds.) *Political System and Change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; cited in: Petar Matic, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

5 *Ibid.*

stitutional solutions through cultural, normative and historical context of the Serbian society, meaning that he considers them from the perspective of the Serbian particularity. For instance, one of such research findings states that the British system of local self-government is hardly applicable in its comprehensive form to domestic practice, primarily due to its specific and very long (centuries long) island tradition, and continued development of the system in relatively stable political conditions; also because it is such an institutional system that is largely not even based on legal norms, but on the local tradition and political practice of the local character.

At the metodological level, there is another specificity of this study, which also represents the common denominator of Matic's and some of our own research studies. It is the analytical combination of political theory and of what is called comparative politics. Although there are different opinions of some members of local professional community as well, it is important to say that it is quite a legitimate approach – very widely accepted, and by that, it would seem, acknowledged in the global dimensions – which, in certain research fields, particularly those that are directed towards

the area of political work, such as is the area of public governance itself, is the only one that ensures a good and comprehensive analyses. Besides, when it comes to such type of research subject, it is exactly this approach that potentially enables that the research gets the applicative function in theoretical and analytical as well as practical and political field. We think that this monograph offers exactly such twofold contribution. However, when it comes to the political field (policy) itself, it particularly contributes to the part of it that covers building of institutions, public policies and political mobilisation of citizens.

Following detailed reading and deep analyses of Matic's monograph, we can conclude, with great certainty, that in the basis of templates offered herein, theoretically and comparatively grounded, is in fact the author's recognition of the necessity of strategic development, cultural and normative adaptation and constant innovation of the institutional (re) designing process within the local self-government, mainly in order to strengthen the political subjectivity of citizens. This goes both for the general level of observation, and as much, and even more, for transitional societies, so-called young democracies, whose political and economic systems are in

the process of reforms, systems that are burdened with different political deviations and economic and social problems, where a general (spiritual and material) and mass pauperisation of population took hold, such as is the Serbian society to which has been dedicated a separate case study in this research. Namely, public self-government, with direct political action or participation of the general public, in modern conditions of complex systems of representative democracies domination at the central level of power, is actually the only or mostly possible self-government in such local frameworks.

Strengthening of political power of citizens, the power of their political action and influence, reinforcing their political and working capacities means at the same time strengthening of democratic capacities of the reference society, therefore the social capital of the state in question. The actual and essential inclusion of citizens (and not only as a formal and legal possibility) in the political decision-making process (so-called policy-making process), through the local level of vertical organisation of power, is the only way to truly create and implement what is modernly called public policies. Behind this is a very important project of reviving the civil, or as some may

prefer to say, national sovereignty. In other words, it means giving the sovereignty back to its original subjectivity, and it is the citizens themselves. In our opinion, it may be the biggest contribution of this academic monograph, in addition to as important diagnosing the status of the local self-government in Serbia and detecting its systemic weaknesses, its causes and consequences. Along with this, a tremendous effort which the author made should also be acknowledged of course, engaging in a venture of making a functional and systematic overview of the selected comparative practices, covering six different European systems (British, French, Swiss, German, Scandinavian and Polish), every one of which has been, as already emphasised, observed through the prism of its applicability for „domestic“ needs of remodelling the local self-government in Serbia. With regards to the very significance of all the presented, particular systemic and institutional solutions, they are perhaps more or less efficient and adaptable to a certain social and cultural and value context, which should be subjected to additional and concrete testing, however they are indeed inspiring in analytical sense, and we can hope that they will be inspiring where they are most needed – in the field of practical and political action.