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# PAR Monitoring and Coordination

## What space for civil society to influence?

The Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter PAR Strategy/ Strategy) was adopted in April 2021, covering the period from 2021 to 2030. During the three years of its implementation, a steady course of reform was set, although with varying results in the different reform areas. The Strategy introduced a three-tier coordination and management structure to improve efficiency, distinguishing between administrative and political levels. The first level, focused on expert and operational tasks, falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government (MPALSG). The Inter-Ministerial Project Group (IMPG) represents the second level. It is chaired by the Secretary of the MPALSG, and it includes coordinators of thematic areas of the Strategy.<sup>1</sup> Other members of the IMPG include relevant representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs). The third, political level is the PAR Council, formed by the Government as the central strategic body for PAR. The Council represents the common political level of coordination of PAR and public finance reform. It is chaired by the Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, with the deputy being the Minister of Finance. Members are appointed among line ministers and representatives of other state authorities, representatives of the Government of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) and the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM).

<sup>1</sup> The PAR Strategy covers all reform areas, but three separate programmes, hierarchically subordinate to the Strategy, are also in force, covering areas of policy development and coordination, public financial management, and local self-government system reform. Coordinators of thematic areas are in charge of reporting on the state of play in each respective area, including areas covered by these programmes.

The structures were established in this manner in order to facilitate risk management and to enable parallel coordination for programmes falling under the PAR Strategy since these aspects were identified as the most important shortcomings during the previous PAR Strategy from 2014.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the form of involvement of CSOs in the work of these structures remained unchanged compared to the previous Strategy, i.e., they are still involved as members of the administrative level coordination body – the IMPG.

This paper analyses how the monitoring and coordination structures utilise CSO potential and expertise, focusing on three factors relevant for substantive CSO involvement - regularity of the meetings, CSO involvement on both administrative and political level and recognition of the importance of civil society contributions. These three factors are prerequisites for meaningful inclusion of CSOs, and if they are not met, the potential of CSOs to contribute in the monitoring and coordination structures cannot be utilised to the full extent.

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### Question of consistency: regularity of the meetings

The regularity of the meetings of PAR monitoring and coordination structures is one factor that can limit the potential of CSOs to contribute effectively. Available data shows that the PAR Council and the IMPG meetings were often organised more than six months apart, indicating important issues, thus impacting the possibility of CSOs to voice their concerns and suggestions.<sup>3</sup>

The PAR Council held its first two meetings in June and December 2021, each lasting 20 minutes, during which agenda items were unanimously adopted. Despite meeting the criteria for regularity, these brief sessions highlight the limited depth of discussions.<sup>4</sup> The Council did not convene again until January 2023, and meeting minutes for this session are not available on the Online Monitoring Tool (OMT), the designated portal providing information on the PAR process in Serbia.<sup>5</sup> No meetings were organised after this one until November 2024, according to the OMT, indicating a lack of continuity in the PAR Council's work.

The PAR Council's work has been significantly disrupted by frequent parliamentary elections in Serbia, leading to extended periods of inactivity due to technical gov-

<sup>2</sup> Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2021-2030, page 52. Available at: <https://mduls.gov.rs/en/documents/?script=lat>

<sup>3</sup> Regularity of the meetings of the PAR Council is also analysed here even though CSOs are not formal members of the body, since they are subject to invitation.

<sup>4</sup> Further information, along with meeting minutes are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/34mk4f3r>

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government is in charge of this website, which contains all data on the PAR process in Serbia. The data is automatically downloaded from the Unified Information System for planning, monitoring implementation, coordination of public policies and reporting, which is managed by the Government through the public administration body responsible for the coordination of public policies.

ernment mandates.<sup>6</sup> Since the majority of the Council members are line ministers, they could not be formally appointed until the new Government convocation, and thus, the Council could not convene during this time. Two parliamentary elections were held in Serbia since 2021 – in April 2022 and December 2023. In 2022, the Parliament was dissolved in February, and the elections were held on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. However, more than six months passed until the new Government was appointed on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022.<sup>7</sup> As for the elections in 2023, the Parliament was dissolved in November, and the elections were held on December 17<sup>th</sup>. This time, the new Government was appointed almost five months after the election, on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the technical government mandates in these election cycles lasted a total of 14 months highlights the need for mechanisms that ensure the continuity of the Council's work, enabling it to operate more effectively.

However, although Government work was not disrupted between October 2022 and November 2023, the PAR Council held only one meeting during this period (the third meeting in January 2023) and did not convene in the first five months after the appointment of the new Government in May 2024, even though a new Decision on appointing the president, vice-president, and the members of the Council was adopted in July 2024.<sup>9</sup> While irregular meetings may not halt the reform process, they do affect critical aspects, such as the timely adoption of PAR Strategy implementation reports. The Council is responsible for adopting them, and until then, they are published as drafts on the OMT. Time discrepancy between the publishing and the adoption of the reports is visible in all three implementation reports published so far, with only the report for 2021 being officially adopted during the third Council meeting in 2023. Both reports for 2022 and 2023 are still not officially adopted since the Council did not meet after they were published.<sup>10</sup> This delay highlights the need for more regular Council meetings to ensure timely oversight in the reform process. Without consistent adoption, the effectiveness of monitoring and reporting on the PAR Strategy remains compromised.

Nevertheless, the issue of irregular meetings stems not only from frequent parliamentary elections but also from the time that passes from forming the Government to appointing the Council members. Taking into account both of these aspects, it can be concluded that the Council was not operational from February 2022 until December 2022 (the previous time the Council was appointed) and between November 2023 and July 2024, which sums up to a year and a half. Considering that the Council was first formed in June 2021, it was not operational for almost half of the time since it was established under the new PAR strategic framework. Consequently, it could not perform its main tasks as a central strategic body for PAR and PFM reform process. Since CSOs are not members of the Council, it cannot be said that irregular meetings of this body have directly influenced their potential

<sup>6</sup> The term technical government refers to government functioning between the end of one government convocation and the official appointment of the new government. Law on the Government in Serbia states that the Government mandate ends when the mandate of the National Parliament ends (e.g. when the Parliament is dissolved due to elections). A Government whose mandate officially ended (i.e., technical government) can only conduct day-to-day matters necessary to run the affairs of the Government; it cannot propose new laws to the Parliament nor adopt regulations within its jurisdiction. Law on the Government, Articles 16 and 17, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2hxfn9a9>

<sup>7</sup> Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2zmpwhy>

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7b6jau>

<sup>9</sup> Until November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024, Decision available at: <https://tinyurl.com/34mk4f3r>

<sup>10</sup> Next to each of these reports on the OMT there is an explanation in the parenthesis that the reports are published as draft and are not final until adopted by the IMPG and the PAR Council. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/5czkpusc>

contribution to the coordination of the reform process. However, given that CSOs members of the IMPG are subject to invitation for participating in the Council's sessions, this potential remains unfulfilled due to lack of continuity and irregularity of the meetings.

On the other hand, since its establishment in September 2021, the Inter-Ministerial Project Group has held six meetings. The first took place in October 2021 via Zoom platform, while the second, organised in May 2022, was a hybrid event. The third and fourth meetings were held only four days apart in December 2022, with the third being thematic and focused on human resource management.<sup>11</sup> The fifth one was held in August 2023, with the latest one organised in November 2024, with no information on the OMT.<sup>12</sup> Although more frequent than those of the PAR Council, the IMPG's meetings are still not regular enough to enable substantive CSO contributions.

The issue of regularity of the IMPG's meetings especially comes to light given that this is the only structure in which CSOs are full-right members and the only channel for them to voice their concerns and suggestions. In this case, the irregularity of the meetings undermines the fact that CSOs are included in the administrative-level structure's work and negatively influences their potential to participate in the coordination and monitoring of the reform process. It should also be noted that the Rules of Procedure of the IMPG stipulate that the meetings are held four times a year but can be organised more frequently if necessary for coordination.<sup>13</sup> However, previous practice does not indicate that this will likely become a standard in the work of the IMPG. Additionally, the IMPG was re-established in September 2024, four months after the Government was formed. It results, then, that elections influence the work of the IMPG, too, although not to the same extent as that of the PAR Council, considering that the IMPG is not chaired by ministers, and its members are mainly civil servants, including senior civil servants.

## **Involvement vs influence: the limits of civil society's role**

The involvement of CSOs in monitoring and coordination structures has remained unchanged compared to the previous Strategy, with their participation limited to the administrative level—the IMPG. However, since 2021, the functioning of the structures has indicated that the inclusion of CSOs has been underutilised, due to two factors - the lack of civil society involvement in the political-level coordination structure and insufficient recognition of their contribution.

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<sup>11</sup> Meeting minutes from these meetings are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3eu7v2yc>

<sup>12</sup> Until December 4th, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Article 6, Rules of Procedure of the IMPG, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3eu7v2yc>

Civil society participation in the IMPG followed an open call in 2019, initially aimed at membership in the Special Working Group (SWG) for drafting the PAR Strategy for 2021-2030.<sup>14</sup> A total of six CSOs applied, and all six of them became members of the SWG. After this, the MPALSG invited them to express their interest in joining the IMPG as full-right members, with the intention for the same CSOs who worked on the development of the Strategy to be involved in monitoring its implementation.<sup>15</sup> The Decision on Establishing the IMPG from 2021 lists 43 members, six of which are CSOs, along with one representative of the SCTM. This decision was amended in April 2023, establishing the IMPG with 45 members, including the same CSOs and the SCTM, a structure upheld in the latest decision from September 2024.<sup>16</sup>

As full-right members, CSOs can participate in the work of the IMPG in the same manner as representatives of the public administration bodies, i.e., vote and express their opinion on the agenda items, propose agenda items, and such. However, in the past, CSOs expressed several objections to the IMPG's working methods. Criticisms included that it is unknown what the final treatment of their comments and suggestions is and that they do not trust they have an essential influence on decision-making within the IMPG.<sup>17</sup> Similar issues were identified with the work of the previous IMPG, i.e., during the implementation of the previous PAR Strategy. CSOs who were then members of the IMPG reported that, in practice, they were not consulted on crucial matters, although the format of the IMPG sessions was formally open for discussion, comments, and feedback. More specifically, they stated that they could not impact agenda-setting or reform plans, expressing an opinion that IMPG sessions served the purpose of legitimising political decisions that had already been adopted.<sup>18</sup> Despite the previously identified issues, CSOs have recently shared some more positive views in this regard. Namely, they agree that the IMPG meetings allow for meaningful CSO contribution and express a positive view of the communication from the heads of the structure. Although these findings show some improvement in the CSO perception, CSOs still indicate that they do not see the IMPG as a structure with decision-making jurisdiction, i.e., that the PAR Council is the central body where all decisions are adopted.<sup>19</sup> Thus, despite CSOs being full-right members of the IMPG, they do not have decision-making influence in regard to PAR implementation and monitoring since the key decisions are not adopted at the administrative level structure.

<sup>14</sup> The Office for Cooperation with Civil Society (abolished in 2020 when the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue took over its jurisdiction), in cooperation with the MPALSG, invited CSOs to submit candidacies for membership in the SWG. This call was intended for CSOs operating in areas such as PAR, rule of law, anticorruption, democratisation, transparency, open data, etc. Apart from this and a few other basic criteria (e.g. that a CSO is registered at least one year before the publication of the call, project experience and expertise, etc.), there were no major restrictions for applying. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yj52jutz>

<sup>15</sup> CSOs members of the IMPG are: National Coalition for Decentralisation, European Policy Centre, Belgrade Open School, Local Democracy Agency, Centre for Policy Research ARGUMENT, and Civic Initiatives. List of organisations which applied for membership in the SWG and of chosen organisations are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/p3m24bt9>

<sup>16</sup> Decisions, along with other relevant information on the work of the IMPG are available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3eu7v2yc>

<sup>17</sup> CSOs expressed this during a focus group organised within the research conducted for the National PAR Monitor for Serbia 2021/2022, held in July 2022. The PAR Monitor is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/7npujtsr>

<sup>18</sup> CSOs expressed this during a focus group organised within the research conducted for the National PAR Monitor for Serbia 2019/2020, held in December 2020. The PAR Monitor is available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2vahprcb>

<sup>19</sup> CSOs expressed this during interviews organised within the research conducted for the Strategy monitor report for Serbia 2024/2025.

On the other hand, the authorities have so far failed to provide the opportunity for CSOs to either occasionally participate or become full-right members of the PAR Council. The Strategy states that the Council may invite representatives of citizens' associations elected to the IMPG to participate in the PAR Council session once a year to obtain information on CSOs' perceptions of PAR.<sup>20</sup> However, meeting minutes from the first two meetings of the PAR Council suggest that this possibility has not been utilised. Same can be said for the third meeting: although the meeting minutes are not available on OMT, the news section that contains the notification that the meeting was held does not mention CSO involvement. Additionally, the Rules of Procedure of the PAR Council state that the president of the PAR Council can invite CSOs to attend a thematic session of the Council in order for them to provide a more comprehensive overview of the issues on the agenda. This possibility is stated only in the case of thematic meetings, not regular sessions, but has not been exercised either.<sup>21</sup> One can, therefore, conclude that, in practice, the Government has not acknowledged civil society involvement in political-level discussions on PAR as either a priority or a necessity.

Given the exclusion of CSOs from the PAR Council, the key decision-making structure, it is evident that CSOs' knowledge, expertise and potential are not fully leveraged on. This claim is supported by the data provided in the mid-term evaluation of the Action Plan for the implementation of the PAR Strategy. For the purpose of this analysis, published in 2023, surveys of civil servants and CSOs were conducted, showcasing the opposite stances of these two groups. One example can be found in the question on driving forces of the reform process - while only 19.74% of civil servants consider active civil society to be a driving force, respondents from CSOs who participated in the survey chose this as the number one factor (90.9% of respondents).<sup>22</sup> Similar results can be seen in the questions devoted to perceiving obstacles to reform implementation, where the surveyed civil servants see the lack of sufficient institutional capacity and human resources (56.25%) as the biggest challenge, followed by financial resources (50.44%). On the other hand, CSO representatives identify insufficient involvement of civil society in the planning and reporting processes for regulations and public policy documents as the greatest obstacle (63.6% of respondents).<sup>23</sup> These findings indicate that civil servants do not recognise civil society's potential to participate in the reform nor consider a lack of active civil society as a potential obstacle to PAR. Hence, the symbolic involvement of CSOs in the monitoring and coordination structures is unsurprising, showcasing that the administration does not rely on their knowledge and expertise in this area.

On the other hand, the previously mentioned involvement of CSOs in the development of the PAR Strategy demonstrated that civil society in Serbia can significantly contribute to the PAR process with their expertise. Apart from this, CSOs were also included in the SWG for the development of the Local Self-Government System Reform Programme, while the text of the Programme for the Improvement of the Public Policy Management and Regulatory Reform states that the members of the

<sup>20</sup> PAR Strategy, page 252.

<sup>21</sup> Article 11, Rules of Procedure of the PAR Council: <https://tinyurl.com/34mk4f3r>

<sup>22</sup> Mid-term review and evaluation of the impact of the Action Plan (2021-2025) for the implementation of the Public Administration Reform Strategy in the Republic of Serbia (2021-2030), page 20. Additional information on surveys can be found in Annex 9 and 10 of the document. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mpdd8uy8>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, page 22-23.

SWG for its development were, among others, representatives of the civil sector.<sup>24</sup> Given that these programmes fall under the PAR Strategy, CSOs have shown they can adequately participate in the development of PAR strategic framework. Additionally, CSOs' expertise has been recognised as essential by the European Union institutions, mainly the European Commission, EU delegations and PAR Special Group<sup>25</sup>, which regularly consult civil society in developing country reports, with PAR as part of the fundamentals.<sup>26</sup> Taking into account the abovementioned testimonials on the significance of CSOs' contributions in the PAR area, their inclusion in the monitoring of the process would be beneficial to the quality of work of the monitoring structures.

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## Is there room for the voice of civil society in the future?

The issues analysed in this paper regarding the scope and quality of CSO participation in PAR monitoring suggest that the potential of CSOs to contribute in the monitoring and coordination structures cannot be utilised to the full extent due to three factors relevant for substantive involvement - irregularity of the meetings, CSO involvement only at the administrative level and lack of recognition of the importance of civil society contributions. The following recommendations emerge from the analysis, as a way forward to address the shortcomings:

- Meetings of the PAR Council and the IMPG should be held regularly to ensure continuity of monitoring and coordination structures, thus enabling CSOs to participate in their work regularly. The meetings should be held at least once every six months or, in the case of the IMPG, four times a year, as envisioned by the Rules of Procedure.
- To ensure that CSOs' views are considered at both levels of the PAR monitoring and coordination structures, MPALSG should consider granting at least one CSO formal membership in the PAR Council. The CSO member in the Council can be elected by the organisations participating in the IMPG as their representative. To ensure broader participation, representatives could rotate regularly, allowing all CSO members of the IMPG to take part in the Council's sessions as delegates over time.
- In order to provide more opportunities for meaningful CSO contribution,

<sup>24</sup> National PAR Monitor 2021/2022 Serbia, page 26.

<sup>25</sup> PAR Special Group consults CSOs in Serbia before each meeting of this body. PAR Special Group serves as a specialised oversight body for monitoring the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. Its primary task is to oversee the implementation of the PAR Strategy and its accompanying Action Plan.

<sup>26</sup> For more information see:

<https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Monitoring-Reforms-in-the-EU-A-WB-civil-society-contribution.pdf>

MPALSG should ensure that issues of concern for CSOs are integrated into IMPG sessions' agenda as much as possible by asking CSO members to propose agenda items in advance. In such cases, the meeting minutes should highlight which agenda items were proposed by CSOs and how they were addressed at the meeting.

- The MPALSG should, as the institution in charge of the OMT, regularly update the sections devoted to the work of monitoring and coordination structures with all documents related to their work, such as government decisions pertaining to the list of members, meeting minutes, rules of procedure, and other relevant information on the meetings of the structures. Although this refers primarily to the transparency of their work, not the inclusion of CSOs, these aspects should not be overlooked since the OMT is the main tool for informing the public about PAR.

Including CSOs in the PAR monitoring and coordination structures is important for enhancing transparency, accountability and the quality of the reform process. Civil society expertise is significant for the area of PAR, as demonstrated by the inclusion of CSOs in the development of the PAR Strategy and the three programmes that fall under it. To fully leverage the expertise of CSOs, the administration should include them in the PAR Council, while their role in the IMPG must be enhanced to reflect their knowledge. These changes would give true meaning to CSO involvement in these structures, positioning them as relevant actors capable of influencing the decision-making processes, consequently allowing for more effective and inclusive reform outcomes. Finally, as CSOs have showcased that their expertise in the PAR area is essential to the Commission in producing country reports, their monitoring experience can be crucial for the administration in Serbia to further strive for alignment with EU standards in the PAR area. This alignment would not only advance the reform itself, but also help facilitate Serbia's EU integration efforts.

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