

# Citizen engagement in city-wide retrofitting in Serbia

**KEYWORDS** Energy poverty; Social acceptance (of energy efficiency programs); Political histories

**TIMEFRAME** Fellowship meetings with Associates were held in May 2020

**ENERGY-SHIFTS RAPPORTEUR** Chris Foulds



## Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellow

### Bojan Gajić

Energy Manager,  
City of Niš, Serbia



This Energy-SHIFTS Policy Fellowship report is part of a wider collection published in November 2020 describing dialogue between 21 energy policyworkers and [86] social scientists and humanities scholars, available via [energy-shifts.eu](https://energy-shifts.eu).

## Policy context

---

The City of Niš is the third largest city in Serbia. Bojan's role involves, amongst other things, overseeing energy data from public buildings, recommending projects, and directly managing large city schemes such as district heating, retrofit etc. Niš is launching several energy initiatives at the moment, and the municipality feels that increased citizen engagement will help in finding the best solutions to current energy challenges.

The municipality has had some difficult experiences in the past with regards to public acceptance of energy-related decisions made by local politicians. Changing a tariff system for District Heating caused huge dissatisfaction on the part of citizens, loss of trust in public institutions and even riots, but also led to further reactive political decisions made under public pressure. In this context, the city decided to launch a retrofitting program for residential buildings, and engagement of citizens and their acceptance of those activities are seen as crucial in the successful implementation of the program.

The City of Niš is also a partner in the EU Horizon 2020 project TOMORROW<sup>1</sup>, via which they will be developing an 'Energy Transition RoadMap 2050', with the participation of stakeholders.

Bojan is in a key position of influence to be able to feed learnings from the Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH) into on-the-ground policy implementation on citizen engagement, and was keen to make full use of the Fellowship in this way (see quote).

“ My experience while working on energy topics at a local level is that important decisions in the field of energy will not be accepted if not developed together with citizens. I, as a technical person surrounded by many technical people, and working in a big and slow public administration, would like to build my confidence in discussing energy issues with those who do not have the same technical understanding as me (which is many citizens and politicians). ”

Bojan Gajić

## Policy challenges

---

Given the policy context above, the overall challenge Bojan was interested in discussing with Associates was: how to develop new citizen engagement programs to accompany city-wide retrofit schemes? In particular, he wanted to learn about better involving citizens in energy-related political decisions.

A secondary challenge concerned the development of the Energy Transition RoadMap 2050 (bearing in mind this will follow the TOMORROW project's methods), in particular by building Bojan's familiarity with stakeholder participation processes.

These challenges were shared with Associates prior to meetings.

---

1 See: <https://www.citiesoftomorrow.eu/>



## Matched Policy Associates

Given the policy challenges addressed by Bojan, the Energy-SHIFTS team looked for academics with knowledge of local and community-focused citizen engagement initiatives, within which municipalities held core responsibilities. Associate selection was also guided by Bojan's general networking and collaborative interests, for instance as part of the EU TOMORROW project. The five Associates matched with Bojan were:

**Predrag Cvetkovic** - Full Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Niš, Serbia. Predrag has considerable expertise in an array of legal matters, including issues relating to sustainable development. His significant expertise in practical governance issues as well as legislative mechanisms, in addition to clear familiarity with the Serbian policy contexts, was regarded as a fruitful starting point for good discussions around Bojan's policy interests.

**Sioned Haf** - Research Fellow, School of Environment, Natural Resources & Geography, Bangor University, UK. Sioned is a community energy researcher with a background in Geography, and also coordinates Carmarthenshire Energy Limited (local energy NGO). She recently completed a secondment with Energy Cities, where she did a literature review exercise for them entitled 'How Local Authorities can encourage citizen participation in energy transitions'. There was therefore clear alignment with Bojan's local policy challenges.

**Colin Nolden** - Vice Chancellor's Fellow, Law School, University of Bristol, UK, and Researcher, Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, UK. Colin is a sustainable energy policy expert, with a background in Geography and History, publishing on an array of issues including e.g. the governance of sustainable city business models, entrepreneurs and energy efficiency, energy service contracts, factors that encourage local authorities to engage with energy performance contracting for retrofitting, community energy business models and feed-in tariffs. As such, there were many synergies to build upon in conversation with Bojan.

**Dario Padovan** - Professor, Department of Culture, Politics and Society, University of Turin, Italy. Dario is a Sociologist with a specialism in energy and a track record in e.g. household consumption practices, social innovation, complex systems, sustainable comfort and energy saving, smart grids. Perhaps most significantly for the conversations, Dario coordinates the H2020 project, COMETS (Collective action Models for Energy Transition and Social innovation), which explores how citizens can be put at the centre of low-carbon energy system transitions – specifically to enable 'collective action' in new and novel ways.

**Marta Struminska-Kutra** - Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology Diaconia and Leadership Studies, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway, and Academic, Department of Social Sciences, Kozminsky University, Warsaw, Poland. Marta works across Organization Studies, Public Management, Public Administration, and Sociology. Marta was invited due to her extensive expertise in social innovation, organisation and leadership, with particular interests in e.g. public sector innovation, local governance and learning, institutional change.

## Discussion points and SSH insights

---

Each Policy Associate wrote a brief response to Bojan's policy challenges, and one-to-one conversations followed between 7 and 18 May 2020. Towards the end of the Fellowship programme, Bojan engaged in an online workshop on 23 June alongside other Fellows and Associates who had working on policy challenges under the 'citizen engagement' thematic category.

In this section, we share the headline discussion themes that both Bojan and his Policy Associates shared with us in their reflections. Specifically, Bojan learnt that the core goal that brought energy-related local stakeholders together may need to evolve; from this, discussions generated three priorities that would help support its achievement. This new potential goal and its three subsequent priorities structure the following subsections.

### **Redefining a core goal: 'Eradicate Energy Poverty'**

It became clear that the common goal for the City of Niš – which local stakeholders (the municipality included) follow – may need to evolve, if it is to more broadly address the interconnected energy challenges that are facing Niš. At present, the focus has remained steadily on engagement to persuade homeowners to invest in energy efficiency upgrades, but the one-to-one meetings pointed Bojan towards the wider aim of eradicating energy poverty.

In particular, Bojan is now especially mindful that the Niš citizens hit most heavily by energy poverty are experiencing social poverty too. He notes that around 50% of citizens live in single family houses and the majority of them use firewood and coal (very often even waste oil, solid waste, car tyres and other), burning them in old stoves and boilers. This 50% are in no position to buy any modern low-carbon energy or energy efficiency technologies. Most of the citizens choose only to heat the one room where they spend most of their time, too. All this is leading to poor living conditions and detrimental health impacts (e.g. via poor air quality, lack of thermal comfort).

Bojan was also concerned about issues around social inequalities and energy management may be exacerbating energy poverty in the city. For example, citizens living in buildings connected to a district-heating system are obliged to pay their heating bills, regardless of how expensive the bill may be or what their monthly incomes/expenditures are. To make matters worse, citizens with the lowest incomes are living in the buildings with the highest energy consumptions, leading to many of those with the least money having the highest bills. As such, energy poverty is a real problem for Niš, and Bojan believes it to be the necessary foundation to build citizen engagement initiatives around.

To address this new goal, three priorities were developed from the Fellowship.

### **Priority #1: Build capacities of citizens to secure their participation in the process**

Bojan came into the Policy Fellowship programme acknowledging that citizen engagement matters, and his Fellowship experiences have only reaffirmed this. In discussing this, it became clear how one-size-fits-all solutions are unrealistic when engaging citizens, and how citizen engagement was not a multi-directional exchange, in that it was not only about expert knowledge being 'transferred' to non-experts – there was much to learn on all sides, especially if novel Social Science and Humanities methods are appropriately utilised. For instance, storytelling methods that focus on imagining the future could allow exchange to move beyond technicalities.

### **Priority #2: Secure the national support and policy alignment**

The political landscapes – both locally and, in particular, nationally – were frequently discussed as constrained what was possible in the City of Niš. For example, the political histories (and related institutional arrangements) relating to Former Yugoslavia governance systems still affected what could be done in the present day. It was discussed, for instance, how a historic focus on self-governance – with workers at the centre and with strong organisations of syndicates and cooperatives – has led to Serbian citizens being firmly against community-owned process today. There was also discussion on how (defining appropriate) regulatory frameworks act as stimuli for initiating local action on low-carbon energy in the built environment.

### Priority #3: Ensure ease and convenience when assisting motivated citizens

There was much discussion around the idea of a One-Stop-Shop, where citizens could receive all necessary information, contacts, and guidance, in helping them retrofit their homes. This suggestion related to the argument that making it as practically straightforward as possible to organise a retrofit would help already-motivated householders in actually making the leap to do a retrofit. It was clear that retrofit supply chains and intermediary organisations were still evolving and thus the provision of practical knowledge (e.g. all in one place, at one time) would be more useful than e.g. continuing information campaigns that argued for the (intellectual/theoretical) arguments for thinking about retrofits.

## Translations to policy impacts

---

The on-the-ground policy impact of this work is very direct, given Bojan's day-to-day decision making role around community-level projects.

The dialogue undertaken in this Fellowship will therefore directly feed into:

1. The development of **a One-Stop Shop in Niš**, targeting the retrofit of residential buildings. To date, a concept and plan for a One-Stop Shop has been developed and interest has been shown by relevant donor organisations.
2. The development of **plans and feasibility projects focusing on establishing local energy cooperatives**. To date, a related project idea has been approved by the mPOWER programme, and the City of Niš will work on this in partnership with the City of Burgas (Bulgaria).
3. Assistance in the preparation of the **Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plan (SECAP) 2030**, which will soon be launched. Many of planned activities will be reflecting conclusions of Fellowship dialogue.
4. More integral development of, and **consideration of societal factors in, residential buildings retrofitting schemes**. For example, a new initiative is under development (to be launched summer 2021) with the support of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which has the potential for a step change in how citizens are engaged in Niš around energy.
5. Given the City of Niš' responsibilities in the EU Horizon 2020 project, TOMORROW – to work with stakeholders in producing an **Energy Transition Roadmap 2050** – these meetings will mean that the City will reflect more deeply on the design and delivery of citizen participation processes.

More generally, the priorities and ambitions underlying the City of Niš' design and implementation of future energy transition policies have evolved, in an attempt to better account for citizen motivations and everyday life. This is testament to Bojan's efforts and in-depth work as part of the Energy-SHIFTS Fellowship.

## Reflections from Associates

---

Associates were asked what they learnt about on-the-ground energy policy challenges from their virtual meeting with Bojan. Here we share some of their reflections, which show a particular emphasis on enjoying the open and frank nature of exchanges.

*“We were **openly able to discuss political limitations and opportunities** which determine the ‘playing field’ on which energy related decisions are made.”*

*“My expectations were fulfilled. I had clear communications with Bojan and **found our conversations to be both open and honest.**”*

*“It was a really interesting conversation with Bojan, and has **inspired me to look more at eastern European experiences of energy transitions.** Research on energy transitions seem to be overly focused on Western Europe – so the Policy Fellowship programme has been very useful in shifting my perspective.”*

*“It **taught me about important aspects of energy transitions.** We discussed these issues in a very open way.”*