

LEGAL PATHWAYS FOR BOTTOM-UP PROJECT DEVELOPMENT IN SERBIA

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In the context of increasing calls for participatory and community-led development, understanding the extent to which legal frameworks enable bottom-up approaches is crucial. This paper examines the legislative framework governing spatial development in Serbia in order to identify legal possibilities for initiatives coming from non-governmental actors. The research employs a content analysis of relevant legislative acts, followed by a second layer of analysis that focuses on the planning documents these laws prescribe and their interrelations at the operational level. The findings reveal that, while the legal framework formally allows the engagement of licensed professionals and legal entities, the initiation, financing, and control of development processes remain largely in the hands of state and local authorities. The only significant space for bottom-up development is found within the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development, through the LEADER program, which explicitly encourages community-led initiatives. In contrast, other legal provisions offer limited room for meaningful participation by non-governmental actors, highlighting a top-down orientation in Serbia's development planning system.

Key words: development, bottom-up initiative, legislation, operationalization, Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

The essence of spatial planning implies a comprehensive and thoughtful approach to the development of all sectors within a given area, with a focus on the spatial aspect but without neglecting others. Such an approach requires careful harmonization of various interests and activities in the most rational, fair, and responsible manner, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of life of the population, preserving nature, enhancing aesthetic values, and promoting sustainable development as a whole (Maksin-Mičić *et al.*, 2009).

One of the central challenges of spatial planning in Serbia is that, despite an extensive legal and strategic framework, formal planning instruments rarely translate into operational pathways for bottom-up project development (Lukić, 2021). Instead of driving positive change, planners often passively conform to the existing system by producing plans that, although formally correct, frequently lack operationalization (Nikolić *et al.*, 2021).

Additionally, communication among stakeholders in the planning process is increasingly reduced to formal meetings, where more attention is paid to administrative procedures than to a genuine understanding of the actual conditions on the ground, including environmental, social, and economic aspects. Field research, familiarity with local specificities, and in-depth analysis are often marginalized due to a lack of time, the absence of legal obligations, or limited jurisdiction (Marković, 2022).

The consequences of this situation are reflected in the fact that development documents, although formally present, have not had the expected impact on spatial development in Serbia for decades (Stefanović *et al.*, 2015; Nikolić *et al.*, 2021). Since the implementation of planning documents can be affected by limited awareness, the disagreement of non-governmental actors with governmental plans, or by the inability of authorities to execute all planned measures due to capacity constraints, challenges arise in the operationalization of planning solutions. This highlights the importance of exploring mechanisms for involving local communities and non-governmental actors as a potential means to address these implementation gaps.

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Contemporary planning theories and concepts, as well as EU practices, increasingly emphasize the importance of involving a broad range of actors in development processes, moving beyond traditional top-down decision-making models. In the face of growing social, economic, and environmental challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for approaches that acknowledge the specificities of places and local communities, as well as for decisions that reflect the interests of citizens, civil society, and other non-state stakeholders. European institutions and initiatives are progressively supporting principles of territorial cohesion, integrated development, and multi-level governance, which are reflected in key EU spatial planning documents.

This article examines the legal framework for bottom-up spatial development in Serbia, highlighting the opportunities and constraints for participation by non-governmental actors. The main research question is: What are the possibilities for applying a bottom-up approach to spatial development in Serbia within the existing legislative framework, and how can this framework be improved to empower involvement of non-governmental actors?

The following section presents perspectives on the bottom-up approach and highlights the importance of involving non-governmental actors in development. For the contextualization of Serbia as an EU accession country, it also outlines the main guidelines of European spatial planning documents, as well as their directions and principles for spatial development.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent decades, the bottom-up approach in development planning has gained increasing support in both academic and practical circles, as a response to the limitations of traditional, hierarchically oriented top-down models. In the theory and practice of spatial development, this approach is recognized as a key instrument for fostering local sustainability, social justice, and the long-term relevance of development policies (Chambers, 1997; Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999). Involving citizens, local organizations, and other relevant actors at early stages of the planning process enables a better understanding of local needs and contexts, contributing to more realistic and legitimate planning outcomes (Innes and Booher, 2004; Fung, 2006; Čolić and Dželebdžić, 2018).

Researchers such as Arnstein (1969), who formulated the well-known "ladder of participation", argue that forms of participation initiated from below that involve the transfer of power to communities are essential for democratizing planning. Support for the bottom-up approach also stems from the argument that local populations possess specific knowledge about their environment – so-called tacit knowledge (Spinuzzi, 2005; Polanyi, 2009) – which often remains invisible in formal technocratic processes. For this reason, many authors advocate for methods of co-creation by local communities and various stakeholders, such as working panels, community mapping, and participatory budgeting (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Fung and Wright, 2003; Albrechts, 2010; Bennett, 2025).

In addition, recent research explores the role of digital technologies and hybrid modes of participation as a way to strengthen bottom-up engagement, especially in post-COVID planning contexts (Kleinhans *et al.*, 2022). New forms of participation, including online platforms and place-based citizen assemblies, have extended the reach of potential participants in the bottom-up approach, while raising new questions of accessibility and legitimacy (Pantić *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, research has shown that bottom-up approaches can lead to greater sustainability and success of development projects, as they increase the level of local ownership over both the process and its outcomes (Pretty, 1995; Cornwall, 2008). Local actors are often better positioned to identify real problems and formulate adaptable solutions (Scott, 1998), while citizen participation in planning also contributes to building social capital and trust (Putnam, 2000). Likewise, several comparative studies have confirmed that programs incorporating bottom-up elements tend to have higher legitimacy in the eyes of citizens and better performance in practice (Evans, 2002; Gaventa, 2004; Natan-Krup and Mizrahi, 2025).

At the EU level, participatory and bottom-up approaches to spatial development are strongly promoted through strategic frameworks and implementation instruments. The New Leipzig Charter (EU, 2020) emphasizes the use of local knowledge and identities in spatial and urban policy, while EU Cohesion Policy (EC, 2021a) mandates stakeholder involvement through the partnership principle. Co-creation and inclusive governance are further advanced by the Urban Agenda for the EU (EC, 2016) and the New European Bauhaus (EC, 2021b). These principles are most concretely operationalized through LEADER and Community-Led Local Development, which institutionalize bottom-up approaches at the local level, and are increasingly supported by digital tools promoted through EU digitalization and smart governance initiatives.

In the Serbian context, several authors have critically examined the limits of participatory and bottom-up approaches within a highly centralized and institutionally constrained planning system. Research shows that although public participation is formally guaranteed through planning legislation, it is predominantly reduced to late-stage consultations with limited influence on decision-making, resulting in low levels of trust and engagement among citizens (Maričić *et al.*, 2018; Lukić, 2021). Furthermore, studies emphasize that post-socialist legacies, strong state control, and procedural formalism continue to hinder genuine co-creation and the initiation of development processes by non-governmental actors, despite normative alignment with contemporary European planning principles (Vujić *et al.*, 2024; Maričić *et al.*, 2018; Lukić, 2021).

An effective spatial planning system supports the **integrated planning of public policies**, ensuring that various sectoral strategies, such as those related to transportation, the environment, energy, or economic development, are aligned to achieve broader societal goals (Nadin *et al.*, 2021). Spatial planning serves not only as a coordinating platform, but also as a tool to assess the **territorial impacts** of sectoral policies. By doing so, it fosters inter-institutional

cooperation and promotes coherent action across policy domains. As emphasized in the Territorial Agenda 2030 (EU MRSPTD, 2020), spatial planning plays a crucial role in guiding sectoral policies to better address the specific needs of places and people, particularly when informed by strategic and evidence-based territorial considerations.

Closely tied to this is the principle of **territorial cohesion and cooperation**, which calls for a more balanced and harmonious territorial development across and within countries, regions, and local communities (ESPON, 2021). Territorial cohesion involves the reduction of regional disparities and the promotion of equal access to opportunities, while embracing **the subsidiarity principle**. This concept strengthens the case for planning that is responsive to territorial specificities regardless of their size or geographic position (EU MRSPTD, 2020).

The importance of **decentralized and sectoral planning** is also recognized within the framework of modern governance. While decentralization allows local and regional authorities to tailor decisions to their development contexts, sectoral planning ensures that specific domains receive the focused attention they require (OECD, 2021). However, such sectoral efforts must not occur in isolation.

METHODOLOGY

Intending to explore the possibilities for bottom-up initiatives in spatial development, a two-step content analysis was conducted. The first step was an analysis of the legal acts regulating spatial planning in Serbia: *Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018), *Law on Planning and Construction* (br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021, 62/2023 i 91/2025), *Law on Regional Development* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2009-3, 30/2010-7, 89/2015-3 (dr. zakon)), *Law on Agriculture and Rural Development* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (dr. zakon), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (dr. zakon), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52).

The second step was an analysis of the development documents prescribed by each of the listed laws, examining the opportunities these documents provide for the involvement of non-governmental actors and bottom-up approaches in spatial development. The examination was narrowed to a case study of the local self-government unit (LSGU) of Sokobanja in eastern Serbia, as, to the authors' knowledge, no municipality has adopted the full set of prescribed documents and Sokobanja is among those with nearly complete coverage. Documents of a predominantly strategic or sectoral nature, although mentioned in the legislation, were not analyzed, as the focus was on the operational dimension of the documents.

Sokobanja was selected as a case study as a municipality with typical challenges, strong development potential, and a broad set of relevant planning documents. Although case study findings are not fully generalizable, they highlight systemic gaps in Serbia's planning framework. Given the uniform legal context, similar results would likely be observed in other municipalities.

The purpose of this content analysis was to identify potential legal gaps and opportunities within Serbia's legislative framework that would allow non-governmental actors – such as researchers, urbanists, planners, local entrepreneurs, communities or activists – to contribute to spatial development.

ANALYSIS

Legislative acts regulating spatial development

An analysis of the four laws (Figure 1) reveals varying levels of integration and comprehensiveness in their development approaches in the following way:

- *Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018) provides a framework for the coordination of public policies, encompassing the widest range of documents and emphasizing hierarchy and alignment;
- *Law on Regional Development* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2009-3, 30/2010-7, 89/2015-3 (dr. zakon)) focuses on territorial cohesion and cooperation among different levels of government and agencies;
- *Law on Agriculture and Rural Development* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (dr. zakon), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (dr. zakon), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52) is the first to seriously include local action groups (LAGs), promoting decentralization;
- In contrast to all others, the *Law on Planning and Construction* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021, 62/2023 i 91/2025) mainly addresses the physical aspects of space and regulates the preparation of technical and urban plans – it does not integrate development objectives but assumes them through predefined rules for land use.

The legislative review reveals that Serbia's development planning system remains predominantly **state-driven** (Table 1), despite the contemporary planning discourse that increasingly promotes broader participation, territorial sensitivity, and the involvement of diverse societal actors. Across all four laws examined, the authority to initiate, prepare, finance, and supervise planning documents largely lies with **state institutions**, whether at the national, provincial, or local level.

In terms of **initiating planning processes**, the laws consistently assign this responsibility to formal governmental bodies – ministries, public authorities, regional agencies, and local self-governments. None of the analyzed acts provides a mechanism through which an individual, civil society group, or informal community initiative can formally trigger the development or revision of a planning document. This reinforces a hierarchical model in which change in space is expected to originate from within the institutional apparatus.

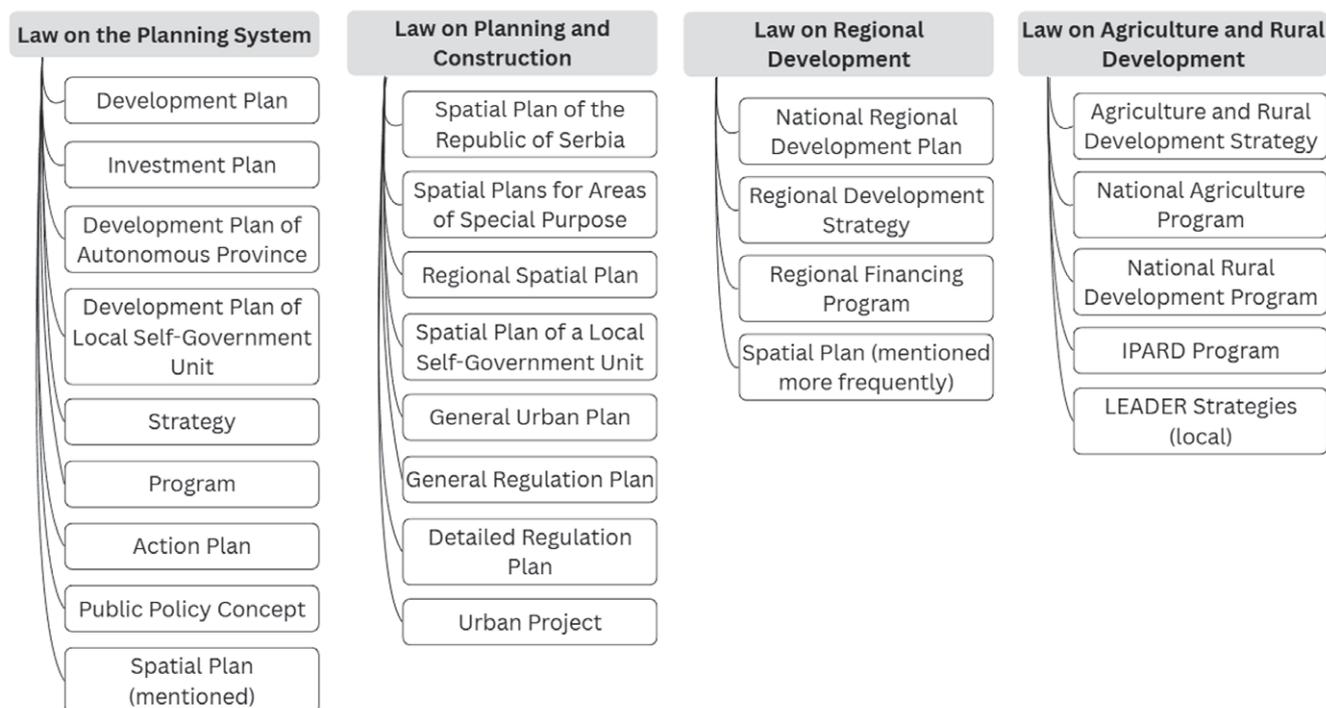


Figure 1. Legislative framework for development documents

(Source: Authors, based on the Law on regional development (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2009-3, 30/2010-7, 89/2015-3 (dr. zakon)), Law on the planning system of the Republic of Serbia (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018), Law on planning and construction (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021, 62/2023 i 91/2025), and Law on agriculture and rural development (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (dr. zakon), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (dr. zakon), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52)

Table 1. Overview of key legal provisions relevant to the development planning in Serbia

(Source: Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2009-3, 30/2010-7, 89/2015-3 (dr. zakon); Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018; Službeni glasnik RS, br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021, 62/2023 i 91/2025; Službeni glasnik RS, br. 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (dr. zakon), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (dr. zakon), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52)

Aspect	Law on the planning system	Law on planning and construction	Law on regional development	Law on agriculture and rural development
Initiators of the document preparation	The state administration body responsible for the coordination of public policies (the National Assembly, the Government, and local government authorities) submits the proposal to the Government for adoption (Article 6, Paragraphs 3 and 13).	The competent authority - the Government, the ministry in charge of urban and spatial planning, the autonomous province, or LSGU - in accordance with the planning hierarchy (Articles 39, 40, 41, 43).	The preparation of the National Regional Development Plan is initiated by the Ministry responsible for regional development. The Ministry initiates the Regional Development Strategy in cooperation with regional agencies and local self-government units (LSGUs) (Articles 14-16). Spatial plans are prepared in accordance with a separate law, but they are linked to development documents within the broader framework of regional development.	The preparation of the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development, the National Agriculture Program, the National Rural Development Program, and the Instrument for Pre-Accession in Rural Development (IPARD) program is initiated by the Ministry in charge of agriculture (Articles 4, 5, 6, 7a).
Required baseline data	Analysis of development potential, trends, and existing plans. This analysis is an integral part of the development Plan. It is not specified who conducts the analysis (Article 6, Paragraph 6).	The Study of Spatial Foundations, Feasibility Study, Study of Cultural Heritage Protection, and similar technical, demographic, ecological, and spatial analyses (Articles 42, 45, 46, 55).	Analyses of the current state, spatial and socio-economic needs, in accordance with planning and spatial documents. Public hearings and public inspections are also mandatory. Spatial plans serve as the foundational basis (Article 14).	Measures, activities, objectives, results, and incentives derived from higher-level documents; the IPARD program contains both general and specific objectives. The FADN system and other registries are also input data (Articles 4, 5, 6, 7a, 32, 33).

Aspect	Law on the planning system	Law on planning and construction	Law on regional development	Law on agriculture and rural development
Responsible drafting authority	Competent authority at the state level, the Autonomous Province, or the LSGU (Article 6, Paragraph 3; Articles 8-9).	Qualified legal entities (licensed urban planning institutes, research institutes, companies), while authorized designers are responsible for the technical documentation (Articles 36, 38, 122).	The Ministry in charge of regional development, regional development agencies, autonomous provinces, the City of Belgrade, and local self-governments act within their respective competences. Agencies often serve as executors of the technical preparation (Articles 15-16, 18-19 and 34).	The Ministry in charge of agriculture and its organizational units are responsible for preparation and monitoring, while LAGs are responsible for LEADER strategies (Articles 6, 7a, 7b).
Funding for the document development	The Budget of the Republic of Serbia, in the case of the national development plan, and from the budget of the LSGU in the case of a municipal/city development plan, along with the possibility of utilizing EU funds or other forms of international assistance (Article 6, Paragraphs 5-6).	The budgets of the Republic of Serbia, autonomous provinces, LSGU, as well as donations, loans, and public-private partnerships (Articles 47, 136).	The budgets of the Republic of Serbia, autonomous provinces, LSGU, EU funds, donations, loans from international institutions, and other sources (Article 48).	The budget of the Republic of Serbia and through IPARD and other EU instruments (Articles 7a, 9-12).
Implementation documents	Strategies, programs, investment plans, and action plans (Articles 6-7, 11-14, 18).	Urban planning projects, location conditions, building permits, and the implementation of investments and relevant projects (Articles 135, 144-145).	Regional development programs, project execution, regional strategies, and other development documents aligned with the National Plan. Spatial plans are the basis for defining locations and activities (Articles 14, 17-18).	Programs and strategies are implemented by the Ministry in charge of agriculture, its units, and LAGs (Articles 6, 7a-7b).
Monitoring and supervision	The state administration body responsible for coordinating public policies submits a report to the Government and the National Assembly every three years (Article 6, Paragraphs 7-10).	Ministry in charge of spatial planning, competent provincial and local authorities, inspection bodies, and the Chief Urbanist (Articles 129, 133, 134).	Ministry in charge of regional development, with reports submitted by the National Council, regional councils, and regional agencies. Evaluation of measures and projects is conducted according to a specific methodology (Articles 26, 33, 40, 47).	The Ministry in charge of agriculture and the Agricultural Payments Agency; there is also inspection supervision (Articles 6, 7a, 8, 35-38).

Regarding **baseline data requirements**, all laws acknowledge the importance of analytical foundations, such as studies, assessments, and evaluations. However, the responsibility for conducting or commissioning these analyses is either unspecified or assigned to institutional actors. While this ensures a certain level of technical and administrative control, it also implicitly restricts the opportunity for independent actors to generate alternative knowledge that could be formally recognized within planning processes.

The examination of **responsible drafting authorities** shows a similar pattern. The preparation of planning documents is reserved for licensed professional organizations, ministries, regional development bodies, or local administrations. Although this ensures professional quality and compliance with technical standards, it further narrows the entry points for individual engagement.

Funding mechanisms are likewise rooted in public budgets and institutional sources, including EU funds and international assistance. While these channels provide

stability, they also reinforce state control over project agendas. The lack of provisions for independent or citizen-led funding streams, even as complementary inputs, suggests that grassroots initiatives must rely on informal channels if they seek to generate planning-relevant studies or development proposals.

The analysis of **implementation and monitoring provisions** confirms the dominance of public institutions throughout the policy cycle. Ministries, agencies, and inspection bodies supervise implementation and reporting, while the involvement of non-state actors is limited to participatory processes defined by public authorities. Monitoring frameworks do not explicitly recognize independent initiatives or community-led projects as part of the planning system.

Planning and strategic documents regulating spatial development

The following sections present an analysis of development documents prescribed by the selected laws, focusing on the case of the LSGU of Sokobanja (Figure 2). Rather than examining each document in isolation, the analysis explores opportunities for bottom-up planning and the involvement of non-governmental actors that these documents enable.

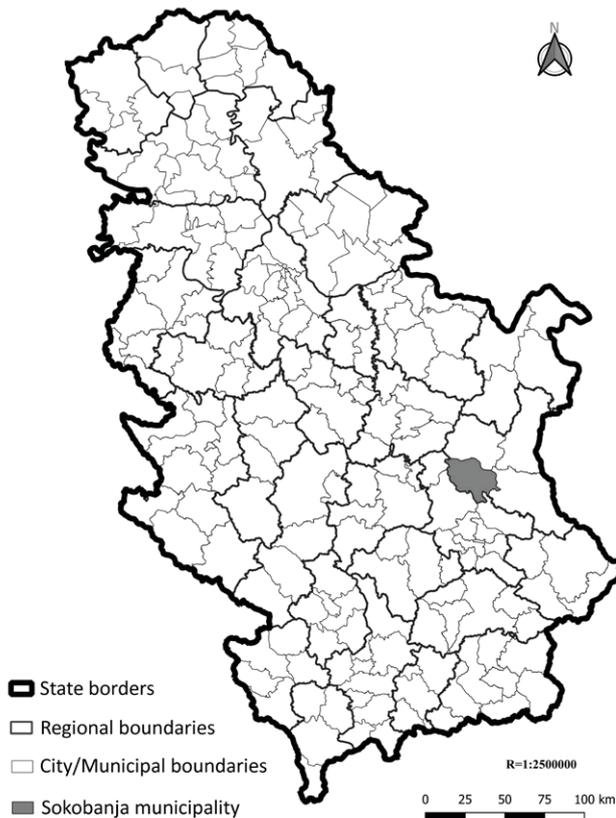


Figure 2. Geographical position of Sokobanja municipality (Source: Authors, 2025)

Mid-term development planning

The *Development plan of the municipality of Sokobanja for 2023–2027* (Development Plan) (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 02-104/22) and the *Mid-term plan of the municipality of Sokobanja for 2024–2026* (Program) (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 02-6/23) form a vertically aligned but institutionally closed planning framework. Although both documents are grounded in the *Law on the planning system of the Republic of Serbia* (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018), they operate at different levels of abstraction and operationalization, which has important implications for bottom-up project development.

The **Development plan** (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 02-104/22) is the highest strategic document at the local level, defining long-term objectives, priorities, and measures. While it identifies development needs and potential intervention areas, it does not provide mechanisms for the direct implementation or legally secured participation of non-governmental actors. In this sense, it establishes a strategic reference framework rather than a legal pathway for initiating projects from the bottom up.

The **Program** (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 02-6/23) is a three-year technical-operational document. It translates selected Development Plan (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 02-104/22) objectives into concrete measures, activities, funding allocations, and responsible institutions. As such, it constitutes the only document within this framework that enables operationalization and financing of projects. However, its preparation remains fully within the institutional domain of the local administration, in coordination with central authorities, leaving no formal procedural role for external actors in defining project content.

Although the Law on the Planning System requires Development Plans to be based on analyses of development potentials and opportunities, it does not regulate the role of third parties in preparing such analyses, nor does it provide any guarantee of financial compensation. Consequently, while non-governmental actors may theoretically propose studies or project ideas aligned with Development Plan objectives, this possibility remains economically and legally unviable in practice.

The only functional legal pathway for bottom-up initiatives within this framework is indirect: the local government must formally recognize the initiative and include the preparation of the relevant study or project within the Program. Only then does the process become legally structured, financially compensated, and eligible for public procurement. Bottom-up project development is therefore not institutionally prohibited, but it is entirely dependent on discretionary top-down inclusion.

Bottom-up opportunities in rural development planning

Within Serbia's rural development framework, a clear vertical hierarchy can be observed: the **Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2014–2024 (SARD)** (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 85/2014-30) establishes overarching goals; the **National Agriculture Program (NAP)** (MPŠV, 2022a) and the **National Rural Development Program 2022–2024 (NRDP)** (MPŠV, 2022b) function as national programmatic instruments for their implementation; and the **Local Rural Development Strategy (LRDS)** (LAG "Rtanj", 2020) represents their territorial application within the Sokobanja area.

In contrast to the general development planning framework, documents defined by the Law on Agriculture and Rural Development (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 41/2009-71, 10/2013-3 (dr. zakon), 101/2016-3, 67/2021-10 (dr. zakon), 114/2021-186, 19/2025-52) demonstrate a more articulated structure for territorially embedded initiatives. A clear vertical alignment exists between the SARD (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 85/2014-30), the National Agriculture Program (NAP) (Ministarstvo poljoprivrede, šumarstva i vodoprivrede (MPŠV, 2022a), the National Rural Development Program (NRDP) (MPŠV, 2022b), and the Local Rural Development Strategy (LRDS) (LAG "Rtanj", 2020).

This alignment creates a legally recognizable space for local-level initiatives, particularly through the application of the LEADER methodology within the LRDS (LAG "Rtanj", 2020). The LRDS (LAG "Rtanj", 2020) translates national objectives into territorially specific project ideas and measures, thereby offering a structured framework in which

local actors may articulate development needs and propose concrete interventions.

However, this bottom-up orientation remains procedurally bounded. Project ideas must conform to predefined national measures, funding schemes, and monitoring requirements established at higher governance levels. While the LRDS (LAG "Rtanj", 2020) allows local communities and partnerships to participate in shaping development priorities, their initiatives are legally valid only insofar as they align with programmatic frameworks defined at the national level.

In practice, the operationalization of this pathway is further constrained by the absence of stable financial support for LAGs (Paraušić *et al.*, 2011). Although the LEADER approach is formally recognized, the IPARD measure dedicated to LAGs has not yet been implemented in Serbia, nor has support for the preparation and implementation of Local Rural Development Strategies been consistently programmed within the national budget. As a result, LAGs operate in a context where participatory structures exist legally but lack the financial instruments necessary to translate locally defined priorities into implemented projects (Paraušić *et al.*, 2011; Paraušić and Kljajić, 2024).

Thus, rural development planning provides a conditional legal pathway for bottom-up project development: participation is formally acknowledged, but tightly embedded within standardized procedures, funding rules, and eligibility criteria.

Bottom-up initiatives in spatial planning

This section analyzes the *Regional Spatial Plan of the Timok Krajina* (RSPTK) (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2011-3) with its Implementation Program (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 17/2015), the *Spatial Plan of the Sokobanja Municipality* (SPSM) (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 3/18), and the Regulatory Framework for the Village of Vrmdža (part of the SPSM, Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 3/18).

Spatial planning documents prepared under the Law on Planning and Construction (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 72/2009, 81/2009 - ispr., 64/2010 - odluka US, 24/2011, 121/2012, 42/2013 - odluka US, 50/2013 - odluka US, 98/2013 - odluka US, 132/2014, 145/2014, 83/2018, 31/2019, 37/2019 - dr. zakon, 9/2020, 52/2021, 62/2023 i 91/2025) reveal a high degree of hierarchical coherence but limited operational capacity for bottom-up project initiation. The Regional Spatial Plan of the Timok Krajina (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 51/2011-3), the SPSM and its Regulatory Framework for the Village of Vrmdža (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 3/18) demonstrate thematic alignment with development and rural strategies, particularly in tourism, infrastructure, and environmental protection.

Despite this alignment, these documents primarily function as regulatory and descriptive instruments. The lowest planning tier, represented by the Regulatory Framework for the Village of Vrmdža (Službeni list opštine Sokobanja, br. 3/18), identifies spatial potentials but does not provide concrete implementation mechanisms, feasibility assessments, or legally defined procedures for project completion.

As a result, spatial planning documents do not constitute effective legal pathways for bottom-up project development. They acknowledge local resources and development directions, but lack procedural tools that would enable local actors to initiate, formalize, and implement projects independently of institutional decision-making.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Serbia's legal and planning framework reveals a highly centralized and hierarchical system, consistent with critiques of top-down approaches (Wolf, 1993; Shohet Radom *et al.*, 2025). Centralization is associated with reduced democratic quality (Tranvik and Selle, 2022), and in Serbia, it constrains meaningful citizen participation. Although a formal hierarchy of planning documents exists, its operational effectiveness is limited. Only a few plans successfully translate general objectives into actionable measures (Svetikas, 2014), while local-level instruments, such as the Regulatory Framework for the Village of Vrmdža, fail to provide mechanisms for implementation.

Regional and municipal spatial plans primarily set broad objectives and zoning guidelines, whereas local regulatory documents are expected to guide practical application. In practice, these lower-level plans often remain descriptive, highlighting a structural gap: even documents intended to bridge planning and practice function largely as administrative tools (Escobedo Garcia and Ulibarri, 2022). This rigidity undermines both democratic engagement and the sustainability of development projects, as bottom-up involvement is widely recognized to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness (Pretty, 1995; Cornwall, 2008). Non-governmental actors can participate only after visions and frameworks are predefined, leaving local knowledge largely invisible in the formal planning process (Scott, 1998; Rossi *et al.*, 2024). Inclusive, co-creative processes are associated with increased public acceptance and project legitimacy (Innes and Booher, 2004). Yet, within Serbia's framework, those best acquainted with local contexts have no formal opportunity to initiate planning. Integrated planning, promoted by ESPON (2021), remains largely aspirational: the Law on the Planning System of the Republic of Serbia (Službeni glasnik RS, br. 30/2018) establishes vertical and horizontal alignment, but the integration of spatial, economic and social dimensions is limited. Coordination across sectors and territories – a precondition for coherent development policies (Nadin *et al.*, 2021) – is often reduced to formal document alignment without genuine intersectoral cooperation.

The absence of certain planning documents reflects broader structural weaknesses within Serbia's planning system, including limited administrative and professional capacities at the local level (Pantić *et al.*, 2026). This situation directly affects the implementation and operationalization of planning policies. Importantly, the same capacity constraints that hinder the preparation of planning documents also might limit the organization of participatory processes and the involvement of non-governmental actors.

Territorial cohesion, also emphasized in European policy (ESPON, 2021), is insufficiently operationalized nationally. Initiatives such as LEADER show potential for balanced

development and local capacity building but remain marginal relative to centralized state control, limiting the equal distribution of opportunities and adaptation to local needs.

The institutional centrality of the system constrains bottom-up initiatives. Citizens can participate indirectly, as stakeholders or commenters, but cannot initiate or produce a planning content. Baseline data requirements do not accommodate citizen-generated or community-sourced evidence, and implementation frameworks do not recognize independent or community-led projects.

Collectively, these findings reveal a significant gap between contemporary planning ideals – which emphasize local specificity, multi-actor involvement, and bottom-up innovation – and Serbia's centralized, institutionally driven legal architecture. While the system structurally limits individual initiatives, opportunities exist outside formal procedures. Informal, project-based, or experimental approaches – such as analytical studies, pilot interventions, or development projects – can enable individuals to influence spatial development. Such initiatives align with the EU principles of territorial cohesion, integrated development, and multi-level partnerships, even when not embedded in national legislation.

This analysis establishes a foundation for understanding the constraints, potential leverage points, and conditions under which bottom-up, individual spatial interventions may gain visibility and impact within a predominantly centralized planning system.

CONCLUSIONS

The research demonstrates that Serbia's legal and strategic framework formally recognizes a multi-level planning system and a variety of actors, yet the opportunities for genuine bottom-up engagement remain extremely limited. Although different types of planning documents exist, the authority to initiate, prepare, and fund them is concentrated within public institutions, leaving non-state actors with only consultative or implementation roles rather than any real influence over planning content or direction.

While certain sectoral mechanisms symbolically open space for local participation, these remain tightly regulated and procedurally constrained, preventing citizens, associations, and independent experts from meaningfully initiating or shaping development processes. Even where partial openness exists, methodological requirements and state-defined priorities significantly narrow the room for autonomous action.

The case study confirms that, despite formal vertical and horizontal alignment, planning documents rarely provide operational guidance for local development. Local knowledge, analytical inputs, and community initiative tend to be overshadowed by administrative procedures, resulting in plans that remain largely declarative and disconnected from practice.

Strengthening bottom-up planning would require a more coherent and flexible legal framework – one that allows expert or community-led initiatives, supports evidence-based proposals, and encourages planning documents to evolve from prescriptive templates into tools that activate local potential. Creating a legal pathway for bottom-up development in Serbia requires fostering genuine

partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors, enabling communities and NGOs to co-design projects, receive institutional support, and see local plans become flexible, operational, and responsive to their inputs. A shift toward such a system would not diminish the regulatory role of the state but would enable a more balanced, participatory, and context-responsive approach to development.

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