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Suzana Mihajlović*

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

Tamara Stojanović**

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY POLICY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA***

Abstract

Since the early 21st century, recurring global crises have exacerbated social inequalities and poverty across the world. The responses to these challenges have led to substantial transformations in public policy frameworks, particularly in areas aimed at enhancing labor market conditions. Within this evolving societal landscape, the concept of the social and solidarity economy has emerged as a pivotal shift, offering a sustainable alternative that merges economic and social policy objectives. This paper aims to explore the following research question: Which international actors have influenced the development of the social and solidarity economy, and how, particularly through the lens of social

* E-mail: suzana.mihajlovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0009-0008-9908-3788

** E-mail: tamara.stojanovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0009-0002-7414-8852

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entrepreneurship practices in the Republic of Serbia since the start of the 21st century? To answer this, the paper outlines several objectives: to identify the main international actors shaping the global discourse on the social and solidarity economy; to present and analyze key principles, initiatives, and programs associated with this development; and to investigate the influence of these actors within Serbia's national context. The research takes a macro-level political learning perspective and uses content analysis of relevant documents as its principal methodological tool. The findings suggest that certain international organizations have played a decisive role in the transnational diffusion of the social and solidarity economy concept. The European Union is identified as the most influential actor in policy design in the Republic of Serbia, although its impact remains limited in scope.

Keywords: social and solidarity economy, international actors, political learning, Republic of Serbia

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global economy is undergoing profound structural transformations that adversely affect opportunities for decent work at a time when labor market demand is rising and economic inequalities are reaching record levels. Automation and technological advancements are rapidly decreasing the demand for human labor, while sectors less susceptible to such trends, such as the service sector, often rely on informal or non-standard forms of employment (Borzaga, Salvatori, and Bodini 2017). At the same time, escalating economic, social, and environmental crises are questioning the sustainability of the dominant model of economic development, underscoring the need for alternative models of production, consumption, and entrepreneurial organization that are not exclusively based on the principles of market liberalization. In this context, the concept of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has emerged as a key framework used to denote such models, alongside related terms such as the third sector, social economy, solidarity economy, and nonprofit sector (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2023a).

Reports indicate a low global economic growth rate that is insufficient to stimulate sustainable development, with recent years

witnessing the slowest growth in the past three decades (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The World Bank [IBRD–WB] 2025). Under such economic conditions, labor markets are characterized by high unemployment rates, ranging from 8.2% in high-income countries to 20.5% in low-income countries in 2023 (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2024a). It has been assessed that global poverty reduction is stagnating, attributed to the slow recovery from the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 700 million people continue to live in extreme poverty, while one-fifth of the global population resides in economies marked by high inequality (World Bank 2024). National indicators in the Republic of Serbia reflect similar trends. The at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate stood at 27.2% in 2023, with more than half of those affected belonging to the unemployed population by labor market activity status. Furthermore, a significant share of the working population was engaged in very low work intensity (9.2%) during the same year (Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 2024).

In response to these challenges, international actors have promoted more dedicated development of national active labor market policy (ALMP) programs as a means to combat poverty and unemployment among vulnerable groups, including low-skilled workers, individuals with health limitations, those with limited labor market experience, and persons with care responsibilities at home (OECD 2021). On the other hand, an alternative model for building inclusive labor markets has relied on the social and solidarity economy, which has experienced significant growth, particularly through the development of social enterprises in Europe, Asia, and North America. Historically, these enterprises have evolved from nonprofit organizations that began offering goods and services as part of their core activities, as well as from traditional cooperatives that broadened their objectives from member interests to broader societal benefit (Borzaga, Salvatori, and Bodini 2017). Globally, the SSE has emerged as a key framework in which social goals are combined with economic activity, gradually fostering initiatives that respond to concrete social needs, as well as to market and state failures (Borzaga and Galera 2014).

The conceptual development of SSE has been shaped by international actors operating in the fields of economic and social policy, who have sought to guide effective and efficient public policy at the national level. Their engagement has ranged from the provision of

comparative data at the global level to expert support in policymaking and capacity building for national stakeholders. In this regard, one important channel of influence has been political learning, defined as the adaptation of beliefs and understandings about how public policies should be designed and implemented (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). This form of influence affects the policy process by “leading actors to select a different view of how things happen (‘learning that’) and what courses of action should be taken (‘learning how’)” (Zito and Schout 2009, 1104).

Learning from international actors at the global level has contributed to the contemporary recognition of SSE as a vital segment of the economic system. In the European Union, this sector employs over 13.6 million people, accounting for 6.3% of the total working-age population (OECD 2023a). Such macro-level learning, typically implemented at the level of national governments, is commonly referred to as “policy transfer” (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) and is particularly prevalent in countries undergoing reform or in the process of joining economic and/or political communities with clearly defined normative and operational policy frameworks. In the national context of the Republic of Serbia, the intensified development of the social and solidarity economy has been linked to the post-socialist transition during the first decade of the 21st century, especially in the form of social entrepreneurship. It is estimated that this model of entrepreneurship has been formally recognized in 47 enterprises, although the number may reach up to 2,000 entities that are legally registered under alternative frameworks but operate according to the principles of the solidarity economy (Koalicija za razvoj solidarne ekonomije [KoRSE] 2023).

In line with the above, the research question of this paper is focused on the role of international actors in the transfer of SSE policies to the Republic of Serbia, building on the research objectives: identifying key international actors in the transnational development of the SSE concept; presenting and analysing the key principles, initiatives, and programmes of SSE development at the global level; and analysing the activities of international actors in the development of SSE in the national context. Given that this topic has not yet been sufficiently researched in the context of international influences in the Republic of Serbia, the scientific contribution of this paper lies in: the conceptual contribution of defining the key concepts related to SSE globally and nationally; the systematisation and critical analysis of the development of SSE policies within the national framework; and the expansion of the multidisciplinary

scientific perspective on SSE by connecting social policy, international relations, and economics. On the other hand, the practical contribution of the paper is reflected in providing support for the development of the SSE sector for decision-makers and practitioners in the Republic of Serbia by identifying potential partners, highlighting examples of good practice, and indicating obstacles encountered so far during the reform.

The method applied in this paper is document content analysis, whereby policies, programmes, and the roles of international actors are examined based on data derived from: scientific and professional literature related to the topic; documents of international organisations and national institutions (strategies, reports, and legislative documents); project documents; and publications of non-governmental organisations active in the field of SSE development. The content of the documents was categorised into thematic areas (actors; objectives, and activities; impact on reform; challenges and limitations), while the criterion for selecting the documents was their direct relevance to the process of SSE development in the global context and the transfer of policies to the national context from 2000 to the present.

SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AS A SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVE – THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT IN GLOBAL SOCIAL POLICY

The development of alternative models of economic organization and provision of goods and services has been accompanied by the emergence of various terms to denote them, such as social economy, solidarity economy, popular economy, and the third sector. Each of these terms reflects specific social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts in which they emerged. Although these concepts are relatively new, socially and solidarity-oriented, self-managed processes of organizing economic life – based on cooperation and the sharing of resources – have existed since prehistoric and ancient times, as evidenced by examples such as Egyptian collective relief funds, Roman craft guilds, and Greek mutual societies that funded burial services (Polanyi [1944] 2001; Defourny and Develtere 1999).

The roots of the social economy can be traced back to the 18th century and the early cooperative movement in Europe (Monzón and Chaves 2008). Although the term first appeared in France in the early 19th century, it gained broader use only in the 20th century when it

came to denote organizations focused on the collective improvement of working conditions and living standards (Noya and Clarence 2007). In the 1990s, with the aim of redefining economic relations through principles of justice, cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual aid (Laville and García-Jané 2009, cited in: Villalba-Eguiluz *et al.* 2023), this model of economic organization emphasized systemic transformations, redistributive justice, sustainability, and participatory democracy, offering an alternative to dominant capitalist structures (Utting 2015). In this sense, the solidarity economy is viewed as a developmental and transformative project capable of addressing contemporary challenges – including poverty, unemployment, the rise of informal economies, and the consequences of climate change (Razeto Migliaro, 2013, cited in: Utting, Van Dijk, and Mathei 2014) – with a strong focus on empowering citizens and marginalized groups through democratic self-management at the organizational level and broader participation in the public sphere (Dacheux and Goujon 2011).

The concept of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), grounded in the fulfillment of economic and social objectives, is defined by contemporary scholars as a set of “economic activities conducted by enterprises, primarily co-operatives, associations and mutual benefit societies, whose ethics convey the following principles: 1) placing service to its members or to the community ahead of profit; 2) autonomous management; 3) a democratic decision-making process; 4) the primacy of people and work over capital in the distribution of revenues” (Defourny and Develtere 1999, 16). In the literature, SSE is recognized as an umbrella concept, while other related terms represent diverse local practices or sets of organizations (Kawano 2018; Utting 2015). For example, concepts such as the popular economy or solidarity economy primarily focus on informal, unpaid, or domestic spheres of economic activity (Pérsico *et al.* 2017, cited in: Vieta and Heras 2023), whereas the social economy encompasses more formal organizations and institutionally recognized forms of paid or voluntary work operating between the private and public sectors (Defourny, Hulgård, and Pestoff 2014; Quarter, Armstrong, and Mook 2018). Thus, SSE, as the broadest term, includes both formal and informal collective economic activities, encompassing paid and unpaid labor, as well as market and non-market forms of production, distribution, and exchange. A defining characteristic is that the processes and outcomes of economic activity are based on principles of social solidarity and collective action (Fonteneau *et al.* 2010).

International organizations increasingly recognize the importance of SSE and are actively integrating it into their strategic frameworks, policies, and action plans, thereby facilitating the development of the concept and institutional support for the advancement of SSE globally (OECD 2023a). The International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed the longest tradition and most comprehensive expertise on SSE enterprises and organizations. The ILO's Cooperative Unit was established in 1920, just a year after the organization's founding, while the first official document directly referencing enterprises within the social economy dates back to 1922 (Borzaga, Salvatori, and Bodini 2017). In the 1980s, the ILO developed the concept of social finance, which covers a wide range of microfinance institutions and services. In the 1990s, it began promoting community-based protection schemes and mutual benefit societies in the field of social protection (Fonteneau *et al.* 2011). Several normative instruments relevant to the promotion of SSE have been developed within the ILO, such as Recommendation No. 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives (R.193, 2002) and Recommendation No. 189 on Job Creation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (R.189, 1998). The ILO renewed its interest in SSE with the adoption of the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008) (ILO 2008), while the adoption of the 2022 Resolution concerning Decent Work and the Social and Solidarity Economy marked a turning point in promoting SSE at the international level (ILO 2022). In addition to presenting a universal definition of SSE, the resolution provided guidelines for addressing challenges and harnessing potential in this field, clearly delineating the roles of governments, social partners, and the International Labour Office. According to this definition, SSE encompasses “enterprises, organizations and other entities that are engaged in economic, social, and environmental activities to serve the collective and/or general interest, which are based on the principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic and/or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits as well as assets” (ILO 2022, 2). Building on this resolution, the ILO adopted the Strategy and Action Plan for 2023–2029, aimed at deepening the understanding of SSE, identifying key needs, and strengthening capacities to promote decent work within and through the SSE (ILO 2024b), thereby reinforcing international standards in this domain.

The United Nations, as another key actor in the development of SSE, adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a new global development agenda. Since then, the UN has been actively developing programs, launching initiatives, and encouraging cooperation at the global, national, and local levels to promote the stronger role of SSE in achieving these goals (Jayasooria and Yi 2023). The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTSSE) was established in 2013 to increase the visibility of SSE in international academic and policy circles. Composed of 18 UN agency members and 15 observer organizations (international and regional organizations working on SSE-related issues), the Task Force actively promotes SSE through policy dialogues, research, documentation, and advocacy both within and beyond the UN system. Through these initiatives, the Task Force has raised the visibility of SSE and documented its contribution to the implementation of the SDGs (UNTSSE 2020; Jayasooria and Yi 2023). In 2018, the UNTSSE launched the SSE Knowledge Hub for the SDGs, a platform that aggregates research on the potential of SSE in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (UNTSSE 2020). On April 18, 2023, during its 66th plenary Session, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution “Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development.” The Resolution provides an official definition of the SSE, aligned with the one adopted by the ILO in 2022, and recognizes its potential to contribute to the achievement and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, A/77/L.60).

The third relevant international actor is the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which, through the Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Programme, significantly contributed in the mid-1990s to the conceptual and practical understanding of the social economy (OECD 2022). For more than 25 years, the organization has been conducting research in this field and supporting governments at the national, regional, and local levels in designing and implementing strategies for the development of the SSE and social enterprises, providing them with empirically grounded and tailored recommendations (OECD 2023b).

The OECD's commitment to this field is also reflected in its long-standing cooperation with the European Union. Between 2020 and 2023, the organisation implemented the Global Action “Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy Ecosystems” funded through

the EU's Partnership Instrument, to support the development and internationalisation of the social and solidarity economy. The initiative focused on increasing visibility, establishing reference frameworks, and providing recommendations in key areas of SSE, primarily concerning legal frameworks and the measurement of social impact (OECD 2023b). In addition, the initiative sought to encourage the creation of a strong policy ecosystem through international partnerships, the exchange of good practices, the development of international statistics, and the analysis of specific thematic areas such as internationalisation and public procurement (OECD 2023c).

In order to further strengthen the institutional framework for SSE, the aforementioned organisation adopted in 2022 the Recommendation on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation, which provides guidance to countries, regions, and cities for fully leveraging the potential of this sector (OECD 2022). The Recommendation defines SSE as “a set of organisations such as associations, cooperatives, mutual organisations, foundations and, more recently, social enterprises [...] the activity of these entities are typically driven by societal objectives, values of solidarity, the primacy of people over capital and, in most cases, by democratic and participative governance” (OECD 2022, 6).

Although the social and solidarity economy has existed in its contemporary form and been recognized in European countries for several decades (Seelos and Mair 2017), it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that the European Union (EU) began making more substantial efforts at the supranational level to promote and support the development of this sector. Since the 1980s, the foundations of European policy towards SSE were laid through a series of documents prepared by two key institutions advocating for a legal basis for social economy action at the EU level before the European Commission: the European Economic and Social Committee, as an advisory body, and the Social Economy Intergroup of the European Parliament (Monzón Campos and Chaves Ávila 2012). Since then, two types of policies have been identified for that purpose: “soft policies”, which aim to develop an enabling ecosystem in which social economy enterprises emerge and grow, and “hard policies,” which are directly targeted at enterprises as business units (Chaves Ávila and Monzón Campos 2018).

A more significant impulse to the development of SSE under the auspices of the EU came at the end of the global economic crisis in 2011, when the European Commission, through the document

“Social Business Initiative,” established an action plan with concrete measures to build an enabling ecosystem for SSE enterprises (European Commission [EC] COM/2011/682). One of the most important contributions of this initiative was the establishment of an operational definition of social enterprises, including three dimensions: entrepreneurial/economic, social, and inclusive governance and ownership. A more detailed operationalisation of the SSE concept for policy harmonisation purposes was made only within the “Regulation on the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation” from 2013, while in the following years a series of initiatives more substantially dedicated to SSE were implemented through funding programmes (EU research programmes, European Structural and Investment Funds, ERASMUS+) (Haarich *et al.* 2020, 1–5).

Currently, the new “Social Economy Action Plan” adopted by the European Commission in 2021 and to be implemented until 2030, is in effect (EC COM/2021/778). The plan emphasizes the EU’s achievements in recognising social entrepreneurship within the legal frameworks of specific Member States, while the European Commission commits to developing and utilising tools and resources that will enable mutual learning among countries (such as workshops for public officials and guidelines for enabling social enterprise operations). In the processes of mutual learning and transferring good practice examples, the EU will support the exchange of regional and local actors with a focus on cross-border cooperation, through funding (European Social Fund Plus, European Regional Development Fund, and the Just Transition Fund) and support for initiatives (such as the European Social Economy Regions initiative or the Social Economy Mission). In its relations with third countries, the European Commission plans to encourage public authorities and EU delegations in these countries to use funds from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument to develop the social economy, while strengthening local initiatives and intermediaries in the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, and Southern Neighbourhood to improve access to available financial resources for social entrepreneurs (EC COM/2021/778). This EU approach, in the context of international engagement in promoting SSE, acts complementarily to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the current action plan recognises the joint engagement of the aforementioned international actors in cooperation with the EU.

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Although the social and solidarity economy (SSE) has existed in practice throughout the 20th century in the form of agricultural cooperatives or associations of persons with disabilities (Velev *et al.* 2011), and although the importance of its development has been a topic of wide-ranging discussions on public policy reform in the Republic of Serbia over the past two decades, it was only with the adoption of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship in 2022 that a legal framework in this area was formally and most directly established.¹ According to this Law, social entrepreneurship is defined as “the execution of activities of general interest, to create new and innovative solutions to address social challenges, the problems faced by individuals or vulnerable social groups, and to prevent and mitigate the consequences of social exclusion, strengthen social cohesion, and respond to other challenges in local communities and broader society” (Zakon o socijalnom preduzetništvu [ZSP] 2022, član 3). It is estimated that between 500 and 2,000 entities operate in this emerging sector in Serbia, registered under various legal forms derived from earlier legislation, while only 47 are listed in the database of the Coalition for Solidarity Economy Development (KoRSE 2023; Smart Kolektiv 2017).

The legal regulation of the SSE in Serbia was preceded by a long phase of discursive framing of social entrepreneurship and related concepts, which started in 2000. Scholars argue that two key factors were crucial to the development of social entrepreneurship during this period: the existence of unmet, authentic social needs of the population and “the influence of foreign donors who raised awareness

¹ Prior to the adoption of the current law, the field of social economy was regulated by the Law on Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities from 2009, which narrowed the target population of social economy beneficiaries to persons with disabilities, specifically regarding their participation as employees in the activities of economic entities. In parallel, it was possible to establish a special type of cooperative under the 2015 Law on Cooperatives – social cooperatives, which may operate as economic entities (Zakon o zadrugama [ZZ] 2015). These cooperatives function based on principles and goals that can essentially be classified as social entrepreneurship, and the category of beneficiaries under this Law was expanded to include vulnerable social groups in a broader sense.

among various actors and provided financial and other support to social enterprises" (Cvejić 2018, 10). In the first decade of the 21st century, the introduction of the concept of social entrepreneurship into the national framework was supported by the United Nations and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), in collaboration with national-level experts. These actors funded research carried out by independent researchers, expert organizations (e.g., SeConS – Development Initiative Group), and non-governmental organizations (e.g., the European Movement in Serbia), which resulted in the publication of studies on conceptual frameworks, good practices, and the identification of the state of SSE in Serbia².

However, a comprehensive understanding of the SSE and social entrepreneurship in the modern national context was further facilitated by the cultural and political rapprochement with the European Union (Cvejić 2018). As part of the EU accession process, especially after submitting a formal application for membership in 2009, Serbia gradually introduced the concepts of social inclusion, social services, and the vulnerability of social groups into relevant strategies and legislation. In order to align social policy with European values and practices and to build capacities for public sector reform, the Government of Serbia established the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU)³ in the same year. Over the twelve-year course of the "Support to Improve Social Inclusion in the Republic of Serbia" program, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), SIPRU promoted these concepts, contributed to public policy development and intersectoral dialogue on social welfare, and provided assistance in reporting on SSE developments during the EU accession process. Its most direct contribution was through participation in the Negotiating Group on Social Policy and Employment under Chapter

² Some examples include the following publications: Parun Kolin i Petrušić 2007; Cvejić, Babović, i Vuković 2009; Vukmirović *et al.* 2014.

³ Within the thematic area of "Economic Development and Employment," the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit was designated to actively participate in the promotion and development of the concept of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Serbia. Thanks to the expert support provided by the Unit, the concept of social cooperatives was incorporated into the Draft Law on Cooperatives, and a series of analyses were conducted on the possibilities for developing microcredit schemes and the potential of social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Serbia (Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia 2019).

19 – Social Policy and Employment. This particularly pertained to the development of social entrepreneurship in Serbia in the context of meeting the objectives set out in the European Commission's Social Business Initiative of 2011 (Dejanović 2019).

In addition to the aforementioned influence on the conceptual framing and direction of reforms toward the strengthening of the SSE, the EU has also played a direct role in providing financial support to associations working on the development of social services. This support has been delivered through pre-accession programs, various EU financial instruments, and EU-funded donor assistance. During the period preceding the institutionalization of social entrepreneurship, entities operating within the SSE sector faced significant funding challenges. Research on grants awarded to social enterprises indicates that their operations largely rely on external donations. In 2016, while 65% of these entities utilized public sector funds, 55% relied on resources from foreign donors and foundations (Smart Kolektiv 2017). Various forms of entrepreneurial activity in this initial phase were financed by the EU and other international donors, applying a bottom-up approach to the development of social entrepreneurship in cooperation with civil society actors and local authorities (Kolin 2013; Hazenberg *et al.* 2016). Further financial support from the EU was observed in the form of a credit line provided by the European Investment Bank in 2022, aimed at increasing employment among vulnerable social groups. This measure continues the EU's earlier cooperation efforts involving the provision of credit to small and medium-sized enterprises in the Western Balkans through selected banks in the Republic of Serbia. Simultaneously, cooperation continued within the framework of the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), intended to fund micro-enterprises and social entrepreneurship, following the accession agreement to the Programme signed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in 2015.

The current stage of institutionalizing social entrepreneurship, launched with the enactment of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship in 2022, has seen the Council for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship take the lead in proposing a Development Programme accompanied by an action plan and targeted measures. This process has also engaged non-governmental actors, many of whom had already been actively involved in the working groups responsible for drafting the Law. Their activities further point to the involvement of

external actors. In recent years, the Coalition for Solidarity Economy Development – established in 2010 and known until 2018 as the Coalition for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship – has emerged as the most prominent actor in this domain, comprising a network of partner non-governmental organizations. Following the enactment of the Law, the German Development Agency (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – GIZ*) funded the project “Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme – Support to the Implementation of the Law on Social Entrepreneurship”. This project aimed to provide expert support and knowledge to the Council during the programme development process and built upon a previous initiative focused on raising awareness about the importance of the SSE sector, capacity building of relevant stakeholders, professionalization of the sector, and support in policy development (“Support to the Development of the Social Enterprise Ecosystem: Strengthening the Impact of Social Enterprises”) (KoRSE 2025). To examine multi-sectoral challenges to the development of social entrepreneurship, identify local needs, and build local capacities, the Coalition for Solidarity Economy Development implemented the project “Strengthening the Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem” between May 2022 and April 2023, financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. During a similar period, the project “Dialogue for Change – Supporting Reforms through Civil Society and Public Authority Cooperation” was implemented with funding from the EU Delegation to Serbia. The aim was to strengthen communication and cooperation between public authorities and civil society organizations in implementing the Law. Since 2022, several additional projects have been financed through the EU’s Erasmus+ Programme, focusing on youth engagement in the development of social entrepreneurship in local communities (KoRSE 2025).⁴ The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) funded the project “Solidarity Economy Perspectives”, aimed at enhancing stakeholder dialogue, analyzing relevant policies and instruments, and formulating policy recommendations that would promote the integration of the social economy perspective into public policies. This project was succeeded by the ongoing initiative “Social

⁴ The aforementioned projects were titled as follows: *Ground UP: Fostering the Development of a Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystem for the Creation of Resilient Local Communities; Shift to Unlock: Empowering Social Enterprises to Ensure Dignity, Rights, and Skills; Social Entrepreneurship Barometer*.

Economy Perspectives at the Local Level”, which seeks to empower civil society organizations to exert greater influence in introducing social economy approaches into local policy frameworks. Both projects were implemented within the context of Serbia’s EU accession and were financed through the “Civil Society for Advancing Serbia’s EU Accession – Europe ASAP” Programme (KORSE 2025).

One of the Coalition’s partner organizations, Smart Kolektiv, has been organizing the “Regional Incubator for Social Entrepreneurs” for five consecutive years. This free Programme for youth aims to equip young people with the skills and knowledge needed to launch social enterprises, offering potential financial and practical support during the start-up and development phases. The project has received support from several partners, primarily the French Development Agency (*Agence Française de Développement – AFD*) and the European Union (Smart Kolektiv 2024). Notably, in 2019, Smart Kolektiv also established the Sustainable Economy Development Fund with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aimed at providing professional and financial assistance to entrepreneurs, including access to non-repayable loans. Another partner of the Coalition, the Trag Foundation, has been implementing a three-year EU-funded project since 2022 titled “The Drive Movement”, intending to provide financial and expert support to civil society organizations in Serbia. The aim is to enhance their capacities for policy analysis and policy proposal formulation at both national and local levels, particularly in the areas of improving the employability of vulnerable groups and developing social entrepreneurship (Trag fondacija 2022).

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) also financed the project “Public Procurement and Good Governance for Greater Competitiveness”, implemented by the National Alliance for Local Economic Development (NALED). Among its various components, the project focused on building the capacities of actors to use public procurement as a tool to achieve social inclusion objectives within local public policies. The project was conducted from December 2022 to May 2024, with some of the activities including training sessions and workshops to enhance the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, including those within the social and solidarity economy sector (NALED 2023). At the end of 2022, the Social Entrepreneurship Center in Kruševac was opened with support

from the Regional Programme on Local Democracy in the Western Balkans 2 (ReLOaD2), funded by the EU and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. In 2023, taking into account the gender dimension of social entrepreneurship, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), with financial support from the EU, developed a guide to educate and promote women's social entrepreneurship in the Republic of Serbia (UN Women 2023).

CONCLUSION

As a sustainable alternative for economic organization, the role of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) became even more visible during global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, when SSE organizations responded in ways that strengthened community resilience (OECD 2023a). In this context, SSE has become a key actor in social and economic development at the global level, with its importance recognized not only by local stakeholders but also by international organizations.

At the global level, international actors in the field of economic and social policy have been intensively engaged in coordinating efforts to develop SSE in cooperation with national governments. The involvement of the ILO, OECD, UN, and EU has been identified in launching initiatives and dialogues at the highest political levels, through the following activities: promoting the social and solidarity economy; operationalizing the concept – defining its meaning, key characteristics, and guiding principles; providing expert and financial support for sector development; and offering platforms for the exchange of best practices among countries and local communities.

In the Republic of Serbia, since the period of democratic changes, international actors have contributed to the development of the social and solidarity economy in various ways. In the early period of societal reform, processes related to the reform of public sector support programs for vulnerable groups, aligned with EU accession efforts, contributed to framing the concepts associated with this sector. Of particular importance was the incorporation of the concept of social inclusion into public policies and the introduction of social services for this purpose, alongside the pluralization of service providers, which supported the creation of an enabling ecosystem for the development of

social entrepreneurship. The inclusion of vulnerable groups in the labor market, as part of the broader process of reducing poverty and social exclusion, was supported by EU donations and funding programs for the civil sector, which also operated in the field of the social economy. Direct financial support to the civil sector was also provided by governmental development agencies, confirming a preference for a bottom-up approach, i.e., prioritizing non-state actors as cooperation partners. During the observed period, limited engagement was recorded in terms of international actors supporting the development of public authorities' capacities for the strategic advancement of the social entrepreneurship sector, resulting in challenges regarding the sector's sustainability, financing, and competitiveness.

In the phase of social entrepreneurship development following the adoption of the Law in 2022, a lack of significant engagement by certain international actors in the institutionalization of social entrepreneurship (OECD and ILO) was observed, precisely when the need for knowledge dissemination was greatest. Besides the EU's continued support in financing sector development, the activities of international development agencies from European countries were particularly important in building stakeholder capacities and professionalizing practices within the social and solidarity economy sector. To enable this sector to achieve its economic and social objectives in the Republic of Serbia, the support of international actors over the past two decades, resulting in the transformation of the national environment into a favorable ecosystem for its operation, must continue, with an emphasis on transferring knowledge for its further development and effective functioning.

Building on these findings, further reform efforts should prioritise the development of targeted support programmes for SSE entities, leveraging existing capacities for collaboration between national policymakers and international actors, as well as diverse forms of external assistance. A key question, why the effectiveness of previous SSE development efforts in Serbia has diminished, requires deeper investigation in future research in two directions. First, qualitative research should be undertaken to understand the contextual characteristics of the domestic environment, including perceptions among decision-makers, SSE organisations, and international partners regarding the factors that facilitate or constrain SSE development within the current legal and institutional framework. Second, once

these influencing factors have been identified, it will be important to assess the potential to engage new actors and financing mechanisms, informed by a comparative analysis of good practices from neighbouring countries and the European Union.

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Сузана Михајловић*

Универзитет у Београду, Факултет политичких наука

Тамара Стојановић**

Универзитет у Београду, Факултет политичких наука

ТРАНСФОРМАТИВНА УЛОГА МЕЂУНАРОДНИХ АКТЕРА У РАЗВОЈУ ПОЛИТИКЕ СОЦИЈАЛНЕ И СОЛИДАРНЕ ЕКОНОМИЈЕ У РЕПУБЛИЦИ СРБИЈИ***

Резиме

У последњих неколико деценија, у области креирања јавних политика, нарочито економских и социјалних, приступ политичког учења препознат је као начин за обезбеђивање ефикасног и ефективног трансфера политика између земаља. Међународни актери имају кључну улогу у овом процесу, а њихови начини ангажовања крећу се од пружања упоредне анализе података на глобалном нивоу у одређеним областима, до понуде стручне и финансијске помоћи у изградњи капацитета актера који спроводе реформе националних политика. Економске и социјалне последице међународних криза у последњим годинама представљају додатни подстицај за реформе у областима тржишта рада и смањења сиромаштва. Поред потребе за унапређењем програма активне политike запошљавања, све чешће се препоручује развој социјалне и солидарне економије као могућ одговор на социјалну искљученост рањивих група. Узимајући у обзир претходно наведено, циљеви рада су идентификовање кључних међународних актера у развоју

* Имејл адреса: suzana.mihajlovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0009-0008-9908-3788

** Имејл адреса: tamara.stojanovic@fpn.bg.ac.rs; ORCID: 0009-0002-7414-8852

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концепта социјалне и солидарне економије у оквиру глобалних оквира, анализа њихових програма и иницијатива, као и испитивање деловања међународних актера у развоју социјалне и солидарне економије у националном контексту Републике Србије. На основу анализе садржаја докумената релевантних за деловање међународних актера у овој области, у раду се износе одређени закључци. Ангажовање међународних актера било је значајно у активностима промоције социјалне и солидарне економије, затим у операционализацији самог концепта – дефинисању његових кључних карактеристика и принципа, пружању стручне и финансијске подршке за развој сектора, као и у обезбеђивању платформи за размену најбољих пракси међу земљама и локалним заједницама. Међународна организација рада (ILO), Организација за економску сарадњу и развој (OECD), Уједињене нације (UN) и Европска унија (EU) идентификовани су као посебно значајни међународни актери у овој области. У оквиру националног оквира Републике Србије, развој социјалне и солидарне економије путем развоја социјалног предузетништва, у односу на ангажман међународних актера може се поделити у две фазе са специфичним карактеристикама. У првој фази концептуализације реформи у правцу изградње екосистема погодног за социјалну и солидарну економију, водећи утицај имала је Европска унија у сарадњи са владиним и невладиним актерима, кроз промоцију социјалног предузетништва, развој самог концепта и приступа који ће се примењивати у јавним политикама. Истовремено, Европска унија је финансирала конкретне активности на развоју социјалног предузетништва у пракси. У другој фази, фази институционализације социјалног предузетништва, значајнију улогу преузимају међународне развојне агенције из европских држава, уз повремени ангажман Уједињених нација, у изградњи капацитета националних актера за постизање ефикасног деловања субјеката који припадају сектору социјалне и солидарне економије у Републици Србији.

Кључне речи: социјална и солидарна економија, међународни актери, политичко учење, Република Србија

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