



Governance International Case Study

Cleaning-up Serbia:

Designing and delivering a public campaign with over 200,000 volunteers



Aleksandra Rabrenovic
arabrenovic@gmail.com

Introduction

Here are some rubbish facts that you can recycle!

According to Eurostat, the EU-27 average household waste per person is 406 kg. The UK has the second highest level of waste at 712 kg – behind Portugal (743kg). Other nations like Denmark (577 kg), Spain (496 kg) and Italy (438 kg) have above-average waste levels. (However, watch out – Eurostat’s data may itself be rubbish! Defra has calculated that UK household waste averaged only 457 kg in 2009–10!)

Talking about waste, this also represents a major waste of tax money – the cost of domestic waste in the UK is estimated to be over £ 1.3 billion a year.

Brits are also rubbish outside their houses! In the United Kingdom it costs £ 885 million a year to clean up the rubbish that we leave on our streets, parks, and playgrounds. This rubbish makes our social areas look dreadful, which means that people are less likely to use them – which in turn sends a negative signal to people that it’s OK to dump waste and litter there, or to behave there as badly as you like.

But it doesn’t have to be like this! A national initiative in Serbia has attracted 280,000 volunteers and made major savings, while at the same time educating and engaging citizens to clean up their litter, reduce excessive waste, and improve how they separate and recycle the waste they create.



1. Objectives

Poor waste management and a lack of environmental awareness is a major problem in Serbia. Ten years of regional conflicts and international isolation during the 1990s resulted in a serious decline of the Serbian economy and, as so often happens, an overall deterioration in environmental protection. The democratic reforms from 2000 onwards helped improve the situation somewhat. However, the lack of a robust legal framework, underdeveloped public infrastructure and the bad habits of citizens in dealing with their waste means that this problem hasn't gone away.

In 2009, only 60% of municipal waste was collected by the public utility companies and recycling and waste separation systems were practically nonexistent. In Serbia's urban areas, approximately 1 kg of waste is generated per person a day, and a bit less in rural areas. While this is well under the European average, until recently only a very small percentage of such waste was recycled.

In 2009 new environmental legislation was adopted, which devolved significant waste management authority from central to local level. However, local authorities had insufficient capacity to carry out their new responsibilities. This raised the question of how the legislation could be implemented throughout Serbia.

In order to overcome this obstacle, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Spatial Planning decided to launch a public campaign called "Clean Serbia". The campaign was funded from the Environmental Protection Fund established by the Government of Serbia. This Fund has allocated over RSD 800 million for co-financing numerous projects at central and local government levels to help remove illegal dumps and support public utility companies in purchasing automated garbage trucks, trash bins and other required equipment.

The overall objective of the initiative in the National Strategy for Waste Management adopted by the Government in Serbia in 2010 was to increase the percentage of organised waste collection from 60% (in 2009) to 75% by the end of 2014.



2. How was it achieved and who was involved?

As part of the initiative, “Spring Cleaning of Serbia” days were organised on 4 June in 2010 and 2011. This date was chosen to celebrate World Environment Day. All citizens in Serbia were encouraged to come along to the clean-up day to do their bit for the environment.

The “Clean Serbia” project team engaged around 25 volunteers to assist with the campaign to prepare for the days. The volunteers were young people who were looking for some work experience to improve their employability. They were appointed for a two-three month period before the actual clean-up day and given responsibility or establishing direct contacts with all local authorities to help them organise the clean-up day and to build their capacity to clean up illegal dumps and fly-tipping.

In 2011, the volunteer team included 17 women and 6 men, all aged about 25. They were selected through an open competition and were naturally excited to get the chance of work experience in such a challenging and interesting project. With their enthusiasm, they brought imagination and momentum to the project.



The initiative received strong support in the media. The national public broadcasting company, Radio and Television of Serbia allocated free slots for campaign videos. Local television stations followed this lead. The campaign was also supported by a number of business and nonprofit organisations. Most significantly, the project was also backed by popular Serbian celebrities – e.g. in 2011 the main promoter of the campaign was Novak Djoković, the number one tennis player in the world and now a superstar and national hero. This support helped a lot to make the campaign highly successful.

The campaign tried to both educate and inspire citizens to participate. They could register through either the “Clean Serbia” central website, by phone or by direct contact with the local authority. The local authorities were responsible for contacting the volunteers and telling them about the sites where the clean-up would take place.

For the 2011 event, citizens themselves were also able to identify sites that bothered them in their local environment – they could make a suggestion by sending in the details of the site they proposed for cleaning – this direct citizen involvement in preparing the local clean-ups also made a big contribution to its success.



The clean-up day brought together a large number of volunteers of a wide range of ages and backgrounds – e.g. students from primary and secondary schools, university students, public and private sector employees, pensioners and so on. In 2010 “Spring Cleaning of Serbia” mobilised about 209,000 volunteers which rose to 289,000 in 2011 – 4% of Serbia’s total population. Indeed, in 18 out of 168 municipalities which participated in 2011 over 10 percent of the local population turned out. This scale of volunteering would be remarkable in any Western European country but is even more remarkable in a country which has no culture of volunteering.

The clean-up day started around 9 am and lasted until late afternoon. Typically, the day ended with a party or similar celebration, organised (and financed) by the local authority, as they considered appropriate, e.g. barbecues, concerts or other cultural events.

In addition, the “Clean Serbia” campaign provided around 40,000 bins for the separation and collection of waste paper. Half of these waste paper bins were placed in public agencies and the other half was provided to private companies. This sought to change people’s behaviour ([click here to read more about behaviour change](#)) by making people more conscious of the need to separate waste for recycling.

It is planned that 30 recycling centers in Serbian cities and towns will open by the end of 2011. For the construction of these facilities 650 million Serbian Dinars (around €6.5 million or £5.6 million) are being allocated. Four of the recycling centers will be financed through the “Clean Serbia” campaign.



3. Outcomes

Apart from the environmental improvements, the initiative helped to build large amounts of social capital as people who did not know each other before worked together for a whole day.

This was a particularly important outcome in urban areas but even helped in villages, “Clean Serbia” also helped to build new links between generations and ethnicities This is especially important in a multi-ethnic society going through political, economic, and social transition following the collapse of the Tito and then Milosevic regimes.

Most importantly, the clean-ups have also changed people’s perspectives and behaviour in relation to waste and littering. Many local authorities have reported that the amount of illegal dumping has decreased and that in general, local streets and neighborhoods have become cleaner. Sites cleaned during clean-up days have in most cases remained well kept. Citizens are increasingly interested in environmental protection issues and are more responsive to initiatives and actions organized by local government. Citizens also now take much more interest in identifying environmental problems in their neighbourhoods.

A survey carried out by the Serbian Government European Integration office asked over 1000 citizens (18+) where they felt most improvements were being made in the following areas important for EU integration: agriculture, environmental protection, fight against corruption, protection of human rights, reform of education and health system, reform of judiciary, and so on. The survey showed that the highest number of citizens felt that most improvements in their everyday life were being made in relation to environmental protection (14% of respondents).

4. Performance indicators

Year	Quantity of waste collected	Number of locations improved	Number of participants involved
2010	100,000m3	3,500	209,000
2011	150,000m3	5,311	289,534

In 2010, 56 per cent of illegal dumps were removed in the campaign. As can be seen, the campaign was even more successful. The “Clean Serbia” initiative resulted in a 12 percent increase in organized waste collection in 2011 (from 60 to 72 per cent). The overall objective of the initiative, to increase the percentage of organized waste collection up to 75 per cent, is expected to be achieved by the end of 2011, three years earlier than planned. It is also expected that by

the end of 2012 around 10,000 people will be employed in the recycling centers that are currently being established.

5. Costs and savings

The operating costs of the “Clean Serbia” initiative have been fairly small. The major cost was provision of around 250,000 plastic gloves and 600,000 plastic bags to citizens. Payrolls cost of the “Clean Serbia” project team were negligible. The media campaign, provided by the national broadcaster RTS, was free of charge and all other work, except for the small project team, was done on the voluntary basis.

It is difficult to calculate the exact savings from the overall initiative. The best estimate is that the total savings just from the clean-up day campaign in 2011 were €1,5 m (using the market price of cleaning of 1 m³ of waste as around €10 Euro). Given that the cost of the initiative was fairly small, the success of the campaign has been an obvious financial, ecological and social success.

6. Learning points

The key learning point of the initiative is that a public campaign with fairly small budget can be very successful if it is about an issue that people care about and if citizens can see that they can make a difference. Good organisation and coordination between all participating parties is also important in achieving an outstanding and lasting impact. The fact that in 2011 citizens could influence the project by suggesting sites to be cleaned increased the engagement of citizens even more.



The impact on behavior change and social capital created through this initiative are equally if not more important than the direct environmental improvements. This raises the question of which other issues citizens in Serbia (and elsewhere) are interested in that might mobilize similar energies and commitment.

7. Further information

Below is the link of the homepage of “Clean Serbia” initiative, where readers can find information about the initiative, news, main activities, documents etc. The homepage also contains a map of localities where citizens can identify a location which they feel needs to be cleaned:

<http://www.ocistimosrbiju.rs>

Below is the link which explains the activity of “Spring Cleaning of Serbia” in 2010 and 2011:

<http://www.ocistimosrbiju.rs/src/Veliko-spremanje-Srbije-80-p1-list.htm>

Below is the youtube link at which you can find Novak Djokovic’s appeal to join the “Spring Cleaning of Serbia” clean up day in June 2011:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEGy0_0SNqE

8. Main contact

Mr. Milos Panjkovic

Ministry of Environmental Protection,
Mining and Spatial Planning

E-mail: milos.panjkovic@ekoplan.gov.rs