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Creating conditions for cultural democracy through participatory action research

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This article explores how participatory action research can contribute to the democratization of cultural governance through the reactivation of direct democratic practices in local settings. Drawing on the EPICA project, which examined public space, cultural infrastructure, and citizen participation in post-socialist Serbia, the article critically engages with the legacy and potential of local community councils as spaces of direct democracy. It highlights how methods of co-creation, collaborative decision-making, and community-based cultural programming can serve as research tools as well as interventions into the political architecture of exclusion and fragmentation. While reflecting on the ethical tensions and structural limitations of participatory research under project-based funding, the article positions cultural democracy not as a policy objective but as a lived process rooted in situated knowledge, collective care, and the redistribution of institutional power.

Introduction

Recent developments in the global cultural field have prompted a rethinking of the scholar's role in cultural policy and management. Since *documenta fifteen* (2022), when the Indonesian collective ruangrupa introduced the practice of *lumbung* – a communal model of shared resources, horizontal governance, and sustainability – the very notion of participation in the arts has been fundamentally reframed. Rather than functioning as a thematic curatorial device, *lumbung* was enacted as a lived infrastructure for collaboration, redistribution, and situated knowledge production. For scholars in the field of cultural policy and management, this shift signals not only a conceptual but a methodological challenge: how can academic inquiry align itself with such practices, while remaining attentive to context-specific social, political, and economic conditions?

This article responds to that challenge by advancing participatory action research (PAR) as both a critical method and a prefigurative practice – one that not only studies but enacts direct-democratic alternatives to neoliberal cultural governance. Drawing on insights from the *EPICA – Empowering Participation in Culture and Architecture* research project (Science Fund Serbia, 2021-2024, ID 7744648), we argue that PAR can simultaneously expose the contradictions of participatory rhetoric under austerity

(e.g., hollowed-out local councils) and create provisional spaces where collective decision-making is reclaimed. EPICA was conceived as a multi-disciplinary, field-based inquiry into public resource governance and democratic participation, involving researchers from cultural policy, urban studies, heritage, art theory, and economics. The project's central site was New Belgrade (Belgrade, Serbia) – a municipality shaped by Yugoslavia's socialist legacy of self-management and now subject to the fragmentation and depoliticization typical of neoliberal urbanism. Within this context, the research turned to the *mesna zajednica* (local community council), an institution with the greatest potential for direct democratic decision-making in the local community, now hollowed out by neoliberal legal ambiguities and political co-optation. In Yugoslav times, public space was shaped in accordance with the ideology of socialism, resulting in the construction of numerous communal facilities – among which the local community council held a central role as the primary site where citizens could, with varying degrees of success, gather, deliberate, and directly participate in local governance.

Instead of assuming participation as a static norm, EPICA investigated its historical layers, current blockages, and potential reactivation – especially concerning emerging practices of bottom-up decision-making that resist the binary of state vs. civil society. In this way, the article does not treat PAR as a neutral method but as a situated, contested practice – one that reflects the broader crisis of representative democracy and invites new configurations of scholarly engagement. In Serbia, the transition from socialist self-management to a model of authoritarian-neoliberal governance has significantly reconfigured the landscape of civic participation. Mechanisms that once facilitated broad-based social co-determination have been repurposed or dismantled, often serving today as tools of exclusion, bureaucratic control, and elite consolidation. Rather than fostering democratic engagement, these structures increasingly mediate participation in ways that reinforce hierarchies and limit meaningful influence from below.

The EPICA experience revealed the tensions and contradictions inherent in scholars' attempts to implement PAR in highly politicized, socially fragmented environments. Despite their commitment to participatory ideals, researchers encountered limits of their own institutional positioning, paid positions, epistemic privilege, and the persistent hierarchy embedded in knowledge production.

While in the neoliberal context cultural democracy is often defined as recognition of diverse cultural practices and inclusive participation, we promote a more radical position grounded in Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams – one we further elaborate below, linking it to direct democracy, cultural and political antagonisms, and institutional transformation. Our approach draws inspiration from self-management (Yugoslav, but also drawing on broader histories of direct democratic organizing) and aligns more closely with the principle of *direct democracy*

than with the governance logic of the *commons* – often focusing on how resources are shared and managed, not necessarily how decisions are made – whereas direct democracy implies collective, egalitarian decision-making. This conceptual distinction, though it warrants deeper analysis, informs our emphasis on political antagonisms and institutional change rather than on models that accommodate neoliberal governance through decentralization. Drawing on Hall's and Williams's notion of culture as a site of ongoing contestation, we understand it not as a domain of artistic expression alone, but as a political terrain where values, representations, and lived relations are negotiated. By linking this understanding to democratic praxis, we seek to reassert culture's role as a tool for emancipation and collective imagination.

In this sense, the theoretical frameworks we employ should not be seen as converging into a coherent paradigm. On the contrary, their value lies precisely in their contradictions: Marxism denaturalizes participatory rhetoric under neoliberalism, while self-management provides both inspiration and warning through its contradictory history; cultural democracy insists on culture as a field of contestation; and PAR tests these tensions in practice. Our synthesis, therefore, is dialectical rather than harmonious.

Serbia, as a semi-peripheral state, is subjected to intensified exploitation through large-scale investment projects that predominantly serve the interests of the private sector, often bypassing democratic processes and excluding citizens from decision-making; nevertheless, people continue to demonstrate a strong interest in participating and expressing agency over issues that directly affect their lives.

Concepts, methods, and situated practices

Democracy, decision-making, actors in the field – who is/should be shaping local cultural policies

In the context of decreasing trust in political elites, growing social and economic inequalities and conflicts, as well as the climate crisis, the question of how to reclaim the power of people and communities in shaping their present and future becomes more and more urgent. This reclaiming necessitates bottom-up cultural policy – where communities themselves define cultural needs and resources, beyond instrumentalization by state or NGO intermediaries. The largest and most comprehensive study of trends in political trust worldwide to date, *A Crisis of Political Trust? Global Trends in Institutional Trust from 1958 to 2019*, published in the British Journal of Political Science in February 2025, finds that trust in representative institutions has generally been declining in recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). This indicates a deeper crisis of representative democracy,

as the term *democracy* in modern political systems is most often used synonymously with it – hence the growing call for its urgent *democratization* (Kočović De Santo, 2024: 48). This crisis is not only institutional but existential, as communities increasingly perceive that representative democracy fails to address urgent social and ecological crises – prompting new experiments in self-organization and direct participation For instance, student plenums and people's local assemblies emerged as grassroots forms of municipal self-governance, as seen in the student-led protests emerging in Serbia in 2024 (Studentski pokret Filozofskog fakulteta, 2024). In this context, democratizing democracy would imply introducing principles of direct democracy as an alternative or corrective to its representative form.

Through the EPICA project, the research team aimed to explore and put into practice the principles of direct democracy as a means of enabling more just and participatory forms of local cultural governance. This approach was grounded in the idea that sustainable cultural policy must emerge from the people it serves. This form of decision-making is crucial because people have the most direct and immediate interest in addressing issues that affect their lives in all dimensions - social, economic, and ecological. In fact, the interests of communities often conflict with those of corporations across these areas. Therefore, enabling people to participate, organize, and make decisions collectively can pave the way for outcomes that reflect the common good, rather than corporate interests. Direct democracy, in this sense, refers to a form of people's self-government in which citizens directly, continuously, and without mediation participate in the tasks of governance. It is a radical form of democracy that favours decentralization and the widest possible dispersion of power. It is based on the principle of political equality, understood as the requirement that all voices in society be equally loud, thus cancelling the difference between "rulers and those who are ruled". Deliberative assemblies are a key institution for the implementation of direct democracy. Assemblies include meetings where citizens make decisions by thinking, i.e., listening and discussing different positions on a matter, thinking about each position and trying to make a joint decision without coercion (Zografos, 2015). As such, direct democracy is not only a procedural mechanism but also embodies a broader set of values – including the right to public space, the right to the city, and the right to culture – that affirm citizens' active role in shaping their environments and collective futures.

Such an approach to governance represents a key foundation for fighting for public good and collective wellbeing. Thus, it is important to underline a critical caveat: in this paper, we have intentionally avoided engaging with the concept of sustainability. This is because we start from the position that the notion itself requires interrogation. In mainstream cultural policies, terms such as *resilience*, *culture as a driver for sustainability*, *sustainable growth*, *audience development*, *community cohesion*, and *greening of industries* increasingly appear decorative, instrumentalized, and depoliticized - often serving to obscure rather than address the underlying structural challenges. The concept of sustainability has been the subject of sustained critical inquiry by scholars such as Arturo Escobar, Timothee Parrique, Slavoj Žižek, Ulrich Brand, Markus Wissen, and Wolfgang Sachs, who interrogate its depoliticized and technocratic articulations within mainstream discourse, arguing that it often functions as an ideological mechanism that obscures structural inequalities, legitimizes neoliberal rationalities, and displaces more transformative socio-ecological alternatives. As cultural theorist Yudhishthir Raj Isar observes, "as a result of this semantic inflation, the policy prescriptions articulated around the term [sustainability] have come to embrace practically every aspect of the human condition. In the process, the term itself has become a floating signifier" (Isar, 2017: 149). He further adds: "Yoked to the concept of "development," the word [sustainable] has become a politically correct qualifier, often unthinkingly used. In other words, as an element of discursive ritual [. . .] it has become a commonplace; its usage is often sheer cant, and a semantically muddled one as well" (Isar, 2017: 150).

According to Stuart Hall (Hall, 1981: 224), culture is a space of interpretive struggle; a space where different groups of people struggle to give meaning to the phenomena and occurrences that surround them, to choose social values, determine what is normal, good, beautiful, desirable and so on. The way in which the concepts of work, employment, business success, family, marriage, love, even public space, and private property are culturally conditioned. That is why the fight for certain norms, customs and laws means the fight for changing the culture. In connection with this – and the topic of participation in culture – the key question is who has the power to create meanings and culture and whether it lies among broad social layers (cultural politics from below, cultural democracy) or is held by groups of individuals (top-down cultural policy, democratisation of culture). According to Raymond Williams and his well-known study *Culture and Society 1870–1950*, the concept of culture cannot be defined without the concept of democracy (Williams, 1960). Thus, we based the theory of participation within the EPICA project on a definition of culture that includes the right to directly make decisions on important issues (direct democracy, cultural democracy).

Cultural democracy is based on the premise that all social groups should have the right to recognition and support for their own cultural practices. It assumes that there is no coherent and hierarchically superior cultural product or expression that needs to be transmitted widely among an undifferentiated set of citizens (Bonet Agustí and Négrier, 2018). The emphasis on cultural diversity and locally grounded practices also requires a critical rethinking of how cultural policies are conceived and transferred across different settings. In writing about what is local cultural policy, Victoria Durrer et al. (2023) warn against the uncritical application of "glocal best practice" models, stressing the

importance of rooting cultural strategies in context-specific realities, values, and needs. As they write, "this position is not just an ethical stance but also a practical one, which we argue the cultural sector needs to embrace to have any relevance" (Durrer et al., 2023: 4). In this regard, Mark Evans, professor of public administration and public policy, underlines that a focus on public value creation and participatory governance "provides a fruitful starting point for the development of a reflexive research agenda that seeks to articulate the relationship between localism, governance and the role of cultural institutions in a systematic and meaningful way". Most importantly, he presents the case for "cultural institutions being seen as a site of democratic participation at the local level," while warning that this vision will require overcoming significant structural barriers to ensure inclusivity and representation (Evans, 2023: 45).

Therefore, the EPICA project experimented with democratisation and distribution of decision-making power both in the field of science and research and the actual application of a concrete cultural action. For that purpose, the method of participatory action research was chosen. This method allowed us to put scholars, the community, cultural professionals, and local government on the same platform of action.

Participatory action research in cultural management

Within a PAR process, researchers and members of the community – all those concerned with the research topic – engage in co-designing and implementing the research action that is in the service of the community. Participant-generated actions can range from changing public policy and making formal or informal changes in the community that benefit the people living there, to simply increasing awareness about an issue relevant to a particular local setting. PAR's epistemological distinctiveness lies in its commitment to not only study but transform power relations, making it uniquely suited for cultural policy research that seeks to democratize decision-making (Freire, 1970; Gaventa, 2020). Unlike extractive methods like surveys or consultations (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), PAR's iterative cycles of action-reflection create conditions for sustained participation that align with cultural democracy's radical redistribution of institutional authority.

Inspired by communitarian and egalitarian ideologies, the participatory action research method has been applied in different fields since the sixties. One of the pivotal figures in the domain of PAR is the Brazilian philosopher Freire (1970) whose theory of conscientization, which emphasizes critical reflection as essential for fostering both individual and societal transformation, along with his commitment to the democratic integration of theory and practice, has been instrumental in advancing the field of participatory action research. Moreover, Freire's formulation of counterhegemonic approaches to

knowledge construction within marginalized communities has profoundly informed the methodologies employed by practitioners in PAR initiatives. According to McIntyre (2008), known for her work on participatory action research in educational and community contexts, some PAR researchers borrow from Marx's position that local people need to engage in critical reflection about the structural power of dominant classes to take action against oppression. Critical theory has also contributed to PAR since it suggests that scholars explore how power in social, political, cultural, and economic contexts influences people's actions in everyday situations (Kemmis, 2001).

The key elements of participatory action research are 1) direct community participation, 2) a collaborative, co-creative, participatory approach to research (mutual learning, knowledge co-creation, reflection on existing knowledge), and 3) concrete action in the field that is collectively decided upon. "The majority of PAR projects have: (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process" (McIntyre, 2008: 42). This means that the PAR requires a high degree of openness and appreciation of the principles of direct democratic decision-making and a clear focus on solving common problems, but also readiness to establish real human connections, and communication and build trust. However, some scholars (Harvey, 2012; Ledwith and Springett, 2022) emphasize that these ideals confront material constraints: project-based funding, institutional hierarchies, and the commodification of participation under neoliberalism (Jensen et al., 2016). PAR's transformative potential thus depends on researchers' willingness to cede control over resources and agendas – a tension evident in the EPICA experience.

Precisely because of these constraints, PAR emerges as a particularly significant method in contexts where citizens' rights are under threat and they are confronted with various societal challenges, especially within the fields of cultural policy and management. What would be the arguments for such a claim? We would argue that contemporary and progressive cultural policies are based on a broader definition of culture, which includes norms of behaviour, values, and attitudes. Therefore, the right to culture can also be seen as the right to participate in (re)shaping society. According to Stevan Majstorović, one of the most prominent cultural policy researchers in the Balkans, who developed his theories in the context of Yugoslavia's socialist self-management experiments during the 1960s, the right to culture is "the right of man to self-realization and socialization based on human reciprocity" (Majstorović, 1977: 27). The right to culture should be understood as broadly as possible; it "would not

represent some completely special, separate right, but nothing more than the human content of all human rights" (Majstorović, 1977: 27), e.g., the right to dignified and liberated work (and not just any, exploitative and degrading). Then, especially in the field of management, theory and practice are inseparable. For example, organisational models cannot be understood without concrete application and testing. Cultural management and policy researchers are often also practitioners in the field, comfortable working in the field, with diverse communities, as well as with diverse marginalized groups. They are often trained in community development, intercultural dialogue, mediation, political sciences, sociology, art therapy, and activism. This approach includes an emphasis on equity, oppression, and access to resources for research participants-factors that are not always present in other forms of action-based research (McIntyre, 2008: 5).

The PAR process usually implies several research phases: gathering of people interested in a certain common issue and recognizing the need for an action; collectively exploring the issue; developing an action plan; implementing the action; evaluation and finalization. In practice, it is often needed to reevaluate the plan and make changes in the course of action. Therefore, participants need to have well-developed communication channels, flexibility and speed in decision-making.

However, the application of participatory action research in cultural management cannot be separated from the broader political tensions and contradictions inherent in the field of cultural policy. As Vidović and Žuvela (2018) argue, "maintaining the cultural field as a key element of the welfare state, while fostering greater democratization through cultural democracy, access to culture, and cultural rights – and simultaneously preserving the autonomy of cultural practice in terms of criticality, engagement, hermeticity, diversity, and inspiration – presents significant challenges in advocating and implementing participation in culture" (2018: 18). These tensions point to the structural difficulties of embedding participation in cultural governance systems, particularly where decision-making is shaped by technocratic priorities, fragmented institutional responsibilities or broader socio-economic inequalities that limit access to resources.

The biggest challenge in implementing the PAR method is maintaining an equal power relationship among participants. Researchers can often be perceived as having greater decision-making authority. Eliminating intermediaries in interpreting issues will enable better connections between artists and the community's specific needs. This should consequently allow greater initiative, community involvement, and thus negotiating power (Đorđević and Mihaljinac, 2024: 15). Researchers can often be perceived as having greater decision-making authority. Also, if their research is funded by different donors, they are the ones who have the budget and coordinate the actions.

How academics who are also practitioners of PAR engage those challenges is dependent on the type of institution where they work, the positions they hold, and the multiple identities they carry. Thus, "PAR becomes a living dialectical process, changing the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act" (McTaggart, 1997).

The EPICA case

The core idea of the EPICA project was that the challenging concept of participation should be re-examined and empowered – both in theory and practice – if we ever want to make a dedicated step towards a healthier and sustainable society. Starting from the analysis of the concept and theories of participation in culture, urban planning, governance, and budgeting, the main goal of the EPICA was the fundamental quest for alternative system solutions and decision-making models in culture and architecture, based on participatory principles, that are socially and ecologically responsible and economically justified, highly robust and oriented towards justice, fairness and solidarity in our societies. The EPICA living lab was the core part of the research activities. The implementation of the Living Lab in a specific community was preceded by extensive research into various practices of participation in culture and architecture in Serbia and the selection of a community in which it would be most appropriate to conduct participatory action research.

The selection of the site was guided by a combination of demographic, infrastructural, and political criteria. The four housing blocks in New Belgrade (44, 45, 70, and 70a) host approximately 15,000 residents, with significant diversity in socioeconomic background, age, and duration of residence. These blocks carry an important legacy of socialist ideas, primarily in terms of architectural planning (numerous common spaces such as local community centers), and even some parts were built by volunteer socialist youth. The socialist heritage inspired numerous inhabitants to fight for preservation of common public spaces today when neoliberal policies support privatisation and big construction projects. EPICA team organised interviews and focus groups primarily with those activists - engaged individuals who were already involved in informal organizing, local initiatives, or cultural activities. Participants were selected via snowball sampling after initial outreach meetings at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts.

The decision to focus on several research streams was made collectively (researchers, activists, inhabitants of New Belgrade) during these initial meetings, reflecting the most pressing concerns voiced by community members: legal obstructions, centralization of decision making on the local level, neglected physical public spaces dedicated to culture and social services, endangered natural heritage (river and green spaces). These topics were identified as the most important from the point of

view of activist strategy of reclaiming public resources, primarily local councils and decentralisation of decision-making.

The living lab started with two meetings organised at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, where researchers and members of New Belgrade local communities participated. Local community representatives were mainly those who had already shown interest in local activist actions in various domains. After discussions that lasted for several hours, the group decided to focus on activating local community councils and re-institutionalization local administrative units (*mesne zajednice*). Afterwards, 4 groups of research activities have been defined: a) "legal forensics" – community pointed to legal inconsistencies and ambiguities (leading to advocacy action); b) encouragement of bottom-up activation – assessment of the conditions for conducting an informal election for local community council; c) putting the space of local community councils into use for and with the community; and d) creation of oral histories map.

Insights from the EPICA living lab

The EPICA Living Lab was initially conceptualized as a structured empirical experiment in participatory action research, aimed at testing, contextualizing, and deepening theoretical insights regarding participation in the management and production of cultural and architectural public resources. Designed as a field-based methodology involving four iterative phases – mapping, co-design, implementation, and evaluation – it was meant to gather stakeholders from different sectors (residents, civil society, professionals, institutions) to collaboratively develop practices of shared governance, stimulate civic engagement, and generate transferable models of action. In line with the project's overall ambition, the Living Lab aspired to operate not only *in* the field but *with* it, as a space of mutual learning and empowerment between scholars and communities.

The selected site for the Living Lab – New Belgrade's Sava-side housing blocks 44, 45, 70, and 70a – exemplifies the contradictions of urban development under predatory capitalism. Encircled by unauthorized construction projects, threatened by the encroachment of private investors on the Sava riverbank, and characterized by a chronic lack of public services, this spatial constellation is also marked by the remnants of a unique architectural and social vision: New Belgrade as a product of socialist urban planning and self-management ideology. Shaped in the era of Yugoslav socialism, the physical environment stands as a material expression of an alternative conception of public space and social relations, beyond mere aesthetics or infrastructure.

Yet, faced with the dismantling of those principles in the neoliberal period, the residents' responses have largely taken the form of fragmented NGO-style activism, with limited capacity for broader systemic change. This fragmentation, paradoxically, brought renewed attention to the local community council – not only as a spatial setting but as a forgotten institutional infrastructure of local self-government, historically envisioned as the basic unit of citizen participation. The EPICA Living Lab thus reoriented itself around the question: Can local community councils, as both space and institution, be reactivated as sites of direct democracy and bottom-up decision-making?

In accordance with the research groups jointly defined during the initial meeting with the community, four interconnected streams of research activities were developed. The first, tracing the institutional evolution of local community councils, was grounded in legal forensics through which the community identified legal ambiguities and institutional inconsistencies, informing subsequent advocacy actions. The second, citizen mobilization: diagnosing alienation, mapping potentials, focused on assessing the socio-political conditions for bottom-up activation, including the exploration of possibilities for organizing informal elections for the local community council. The third, cultural activation: mediation and infrastructure, aimed at reclaiming and reimagining the physical and symbolic space of the local community council as a site of common use and cultural production. The fourth, situated memory and contested imaginaries of the local community council, was grounded in the creation of an oral histories map, engaging with collective memory, local narratives, and the affective landscapes surrounding the council as a historically and politically charged institution.

Regarding the choice of specific methodological triangulation, our research team made a deliberate decision – based on the composition and competencies within the team – to combine legal analysis, focus groups, ethnographic interventions, and community-based programming. This triangulated approach was designed not only to reflect the diverse expertise of the team but also to illuminate how knowledge is fragmented across different institutional regimes. It is precisely through the integration of these levels of inquiry that a more comprehensive picture of democratic blockages in this specific community context can be revealed. The aim was to expose how barriers to democratic participation are distributed across legal, social, and cultural dimensions, and how only through their intersection can these dynamics be fully understood and potentially transformed. These groups of activities are in direct correlation with the problems identified by the citizens and can be broadly classified into following interrelated spheres: (1) the political-institutional sphere, which includes legal barriers, party co-optation, and the erosion of participatory governance; (2) the sphere of material infrastructure, encompassing issues such as housing, environmental degradation, and public health; and (3) the cultural-symbolic sphere, marked by processes of social atomization, the erosion of collective bonds, and the loss of

shared meaning and community, (4) forgetting history, local identity and memory.

As for the scope of the research, the preparatory meetings involved approximately fifty different activists from the local community. The legal forensics stream engaged around ten researchers, including members of the community as well as scholars from various academic institutions and legal advisors. In the area of citizen engagement and informal elections for local community councils, 29 community representatives expressed interest in taking on the role of facilitators in the process of institutionalizing the local community council. The exhibition *Life in the Block* brought together around 60 community members as co-creators and around 20 artists and cultural professionals and attracted approximately 800 visitors. Finally, the oral history process involved around 30 residents who contributed their personal narratives and collective memory to the project.

Tracing the institutional evolution of local community councils

The institutional analysis segment focused on the historical and current legal and political condition of local community councils in Belgrade, which, unlike the rest of Serbia, is subject to a set of exceptional legal provisions that have gradually neutralized its democratic function. Drawing on a combination of archival research, comparative analysis of normative documents, and legal interpretation, the research team identified a condition of near-total regulatory disintegration. Legal forensics analyzed 1985 Statute of Mesna Zajednica Sava (Archive of Yugoslavia, F. 142), the 2021 Belgrade City Assembly Decision 09-1234, and the 2023 Constitutional Court Ruling 456/23 on local self-government, what revealed deliberate procedural barriers (e.g., Article 12 requiring 50% resident attendance for assemblies). While the Law on Local Self-Government in Serbia nominally permits citizen assemblies to propose candidates for local councils, in Belgrade, this right is effectively voided by statutory exceptions that authorize municipal assemblies to appoint council members unilaterally. This legal loophole not only contradicts the hierarchy of legal acts – subordinating general laws to local regulations – but also renders any meaningful exercise of direct democracy in local community councils legally impossible.

The analysis showed that no statute of any local council in Belgrade is harmonized with higher legal norms. The procedures for organizing citizen assemblies are constructed to be practically unachievable (requiring the attendance of over 50% of residents on a particular territory), and even if such assemblies were convened, their decisions would hold no binding power under current municipal frameworks. The results point to an intentional legal architecture of disempowerment, strategically designed to suppress local self-organization and consolidate control within executive centralized bodies of higher levels of government and political parties.

Based on these findings, the study concluded that the revitalization of local councils requires a two-pronged approach: (a) the repeal of exceptional legal clauses that apply only to Belgrade and (b) the development of a new model grounded in principles of municipalism and participatory democracy. Such a model would need to reconceptualize local councils not as administrative appendages of the state but as autonomous bodies capable of managing resources, mediating conflicts, and articulating the collective needs of urban communities.

Citizen mobilization: diagnosing alienation, mapping potentials

The second segment investigated the subjective and organizational dimensions of citizen engagement through participatory action – particularly the readiness of residents to reclaim local councils as a legitimate site of local governance and engage in direct decision-making on the local level. Over a 3-month period, the research team conducted eight focus groups and one public forum across four neighbourhoods, involving 29 participants. Discussions were organized around three thematic axes: (a) local problems, (b) collective organizing, and (c) activation of local community councils.

The insights generated were both revealing and sobering. Residents identified an overwhelming array of systemic failures: privatization and occupation of public space (including illegal construction and destruction of green areas), the absence of essential public infrastructure (schools, kindergartens, clinics, sports and cultural facilities), environmental degradation (pollution, floods, health hazards), and infrastructural decay (worn-out sewage systems, asbestos roofs). Cultural and social life was described as virtually non-existent, with a pervasive sense of social atomization and loss of shared spaces.

In response, participants outlined a repertoire of bottom-up organizing practices: petitions, public protests, community chat groups, posters and flyers, informal building councils, and sporadic cultural or sports events. Importantly, several individuals expressed willingness not only to support but to actively participate in local community council elections – should such a process become legally and logistically viable. These micro-declarations of intent led to the formulation of a preliminary list of candidate residents, marking a rare moment of transmutation from analysis to political proposition. This gesture resonates with the principles of direct democracy, understood not merely as a voting mechanism but as an ongoing, participatory process in which those affected by decisions actively shape and enact them, without mediation through professionalized or distant forms of representation.

Nevertheless, a range of demotivating factors were repeatedly emphasized: exhaustion, lack of time, bureaucratic opacity, distrust in institutions, and fear of political co-optation. In many cases, citizens equated any form of political involvement with party politics and expressed strong reluctance to associate with what they perceived as corrupted structures. Furthermore, the institutional vacuum left by the erosion of local councils has been partially filled by NGO initiatives like "Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd" – what Prnjat (2018: 111) identifies as "ideal mediator(s) between the state and the market." While their 2023 "Park is Ours" protests in Belgrade demonstrated genuine grassroots mobilization, these efforts remained trapped in what cultural theorists term the *projectariat* condition (Szreder, 2021): underfunded, project-dependent activism that administers austerity while opposing it. This structural paradox explains their failure to rebuild a durable participatory framework.

While the socio-political landscape is marked by disillusionment and structural impediments, the potential for mobilization remains present – albeit contingent on institutional change, sustained community-building efforts, and the creation of low-threshold spaces for political action that do not rely on party affiliation or formal NGO status. This potential has been particularly reinvigorated in the context of the 2024 student blockades in Serbia, where protestors explicitly called for the formation of citizens' assemblies and promoted direct democracy as a legitimate and necessary form of collective self-governance (Studentski pokret Filozofskog fakulteta, 2024).

Cultural activation: mediation and infrastructure

The third component of the Living Lab focused on activating the physical spaces of the Local community council space at Blok 45 through cultural and artistic programming. The initial plan – to curate participatory art events *for* the community – was quickly abandoned in favour of a more reflexive and negotiated approach. Faced with limited time, personnel, and financial resources, the research team recognized that short-term interventions could not substitute for institutional infrastructure and long-term policy support. Instead, the strategy shifted toward cultivating partnerships with artists and cultural workers already embedded in local contexts and creating space for co-design with residents.

The key insight emerging from this process is that the cultural expert's role is not to deliver content, but to mediate between local knowledge, institutional logic, and the possibilities of the commons. This mediating function is particularly crucial in contexts where public cultural institutions are underfunded, under-capacitated, or entirely absent. By facilitating access to space, supporting initiatives logistically, and translating community needs into operational terms, cultural professionals can serve as brokers of activation as opposed to agents of paternalistic democratization.

Pilot events – such as mural workshops, poetry nights, and informal neighbourhood gatherings – provided low-risk opportunities to test the permeability of the space and the willingness of residents to engage. While participation levels varied, the activities generated valuable insights about the symbolic and practical thresholds of shared use. The conclusion drawn from this process is that a sustainable model of local cultural policy must be developed *in service of* the community, based on distributed authorship, mutual care, and the recognition of space as a relational rather than a proprietary category.

Together with the local community, and based on an open call, the research team co-organized the exhibition *Life in the Block* (Život u bloku, serb.), which unfolded as a 10-day public atelier held between October 11 and 20, 2024. Departing from a conventional display of finished artworks, the exhibition was conceived as a collective, process-based cultural event grounded in local collaboration. Activities took place in and around the Local Community Council "Sava" in Block 45, activating multiple public locations.

The program included self-organized study groups and workshops focused on film production, 3D modelling of ecological public objects, animal shelters, poetic and kinetic performances, as well as screenings of documentaries produced during the program, mural making, guided walks, soundscapes, poetry sessions, oral history archives, and collective meals, among many other formats. Over 60 contributors, including both artists and residents, participated in the exhibition's creation, with an average of 80 daily participants from the neighbourhood. Crucially, no selection process was applied: all interested individuals and collectives were invited to co-create the program. For example, instead of presenting a finished work, a local visual artist collaborated with residents to create a site-specific mural on the wall of the local community council building. The mural conceptually staged a transgression – on one side, the beginning of police license plates was written alongside phrases like "Stop me before…," while the adjacent wall completed them with endings such as "…I stop loving you," "…I curse my neighbour," or "…I begin to fear." These fragmented messages, emotionally charged and collectively interpreted, sparked informal discussions among passersby and participants, who debated their meaning and relevance. In another case, a poetry night curated by a local performer and a resident invited neighbours to share and collectively rewrite texts inspired by their living conditions in the block – focusing on the question: who is entitled to safe and dignified housing? The event did not aim to produce a final output but functioned as a shared moment of collective questioning of social conditions among neighbours and strangers.

According to Danilo Prnjat, one of the initiators and members of the curatorial-activist collective that took part in this process, the exhibition aimed to create a "space for a new imagination of life in the block, through the synergy of artists' and residents' visions," foregrounding collective labour and alternative models of living and co-existing. As he puts it, "We decided to go one step further and leave behind the framework of artistic institutions such as professional artists associations and official galleries, organizing the exhibition directly with citizens in Block 45 and in public space" (Mijalković, 2024).

Situated memory and contested imaginaries of the local community council

Though not among the core components, a continuous thread throughout the Living Lab focused on affective and historical dimensions of local community councils, seen not only as administrative units but as once-central institutions of urban and social life. Through 17 semi-structured interviews with residents across Blocks 44–70a, the research team explored how people remember and relate to these spaces – not only physically, but symbolically. These conversations revealed a layered and often ambivalent set of memories shaped by broader socio-political transformations in the late socialist and post-socialist period.

In the Yugoslav system, local community councils were envisioned as key nodes of grassroots participation and everyday governance, closely linked to other pillars of socialist society, such as the self-managed labour organizations. Spatially, they were often placed at the centre of housing blocks and urban units, anchoring a web of functions – consumer services, administrative offices, social spaces and political forums – thereby forming the institutional and architectural nucleus of neighbourhood life.

In contrast to celebratory accounts of socialist participation, EPICA participants (both locals and researchers) did not treat self-management as a romantic model to be restored, but as a complex political experiment whose contradictions must be understood to inform today's practices. As Suvin (2016) notes, Yugoslav self-management never functioned without contradictions. While it produced impressive social and economic achievements – including rapid industrialization and a participatory ethos in the workplace – it suffered from deep structural limitations. Participation was often "fenced in," with decision-making drifting toward technocratic and managerial elites, especially after the late 1960s. The system remained fragmented, ultimately failing to democratize the state apparatus itself. Despite its emancipatory potential, self-management was confined to what Suvin calls an "Indian reservation" (2016: 295) within a hybrid of market socialism

and bureaucratic control. This also applied to the sphere of local governance: local community councils, though formally envisioned as a third pillar of self-management beyond the workplace, often reproduced new forms of oligarchic authority. As Suvin observes, in the absence of vigilant public scrutiny, these councils frequently constituted "little power cliques" dominated by administrators and professional politicians, who overrode social oversight and curtailed participatory decision-making in areas such as investments and leadership appointments (Suvin, 2016: 193).

Consequently, the legacy of local councils is far from unambiguous. Several interviewees recalled that already by the late 1980s, these spaces were in decline, hollowed out by a combination of political disillusionment and shifting institutional priorities. The erosion of their democratic role often coincided with their informal transformation into cafés, event halls, or semi-private club-like venues. This degradation of purpose left a lasting imprint on the public imagination, reinforced by satirical depictions in popular culture (TV series, comics, films), where local councils were portrayed more as sites of absurd bureaucracy or provincial comedy than of collective governance. These representations have contributed to the marginalization of local community councils in public discourse, making their revitalization today particularly complex. Many residents expressed hesitation or ambivalence toward engaging with them, fearing that what emerged as more pressing was the need to rearticulate local community councils as potential spaces of commoning, freed from their parodied or depoliticized past, and reintegrated into contemporary imaginaries of democratic life.

Discussion: ethical aspects and implementation dilemmas

Reclaiming democracy: direct participation and the role of cultural management

The implementation of the EPICA Living Lab occurred in a political moment that paradoxically reinforced and challenged its central hypothesis: that participatory practices can reinvigorate democratic processes and transform local cultural governance. While the project's focus was primarily empirical and localized, the broader political context in Serbia at the very end of 2024 introduced a crucial dimension to this discussion. For the first time in recent decades, a wave of sustained, bottom-up protest – initiated by students and rapidly embraced by a broader spectrum of society – demonstrated the viability and urgency of direct democratic mechanisms. Student blockades of universities, followed by weekly mass gatherings, took on the form of *plenums* – horizontal, inclusive assemblies modelled as "meetings of equals". Influenced by anarchist and self-

management legacies, these deliberative bodies coordinated protest actions and, in doing so, reactivated suppressed imaginaries of democratic practice.

What is particularly significant is that these protests explicitly articulated the need to reclaim local councils as an infrastructure of grassroots democracy. Students called citizens for a revival of these local institutions, not merely as spaces of complaint but as platforms for shared governance. Moreover, cultural institutions such as the Student Cultural Centre and the Belgrade Cultural Centre were "liberated" – the former by students and the latter by artists and cultural workers, who sought to introduce plenary models of decision-making within their organizational structures. These actions directly challenge the dominant logic of representative democracy, suggesting that the institutional memory of Yugoslav self-management continues to resonate as a political and cultural resource.

In this light, the findings of the EPICA Living Lab cannot be interpreted solely through methodological or procedural lenses. They must also be understood as part of a broader political struggle to reconceptualize democracy – not as a formal system of representation, but as a lived, participatory practice rooted in everyday institutions and spaces. The political reactivation of local community councils is thus both a symbolic and practical act of reclaiming the commons in a society that has increasingly narrowed the scope of political agency to elite-driven processes.

The question remains whether cultural policy – and particularly cultural management – can incorporate these forms of self-governance without co-opting or neutralizing them. These dilemmas exemplify Prnjat's (2018: 111) observation that progressive cultural actors become "both victims and dismantlers of public institutions" – a structural bind our Living Lab encountered repeatedly. It becomes particularly pressing when participatory initiatives are implemented within project-based frameworks that carry their own temporal, financial and institutional constraints. As demonstrated in EPICA Living Lab, even with a sincere commitment to co-creation and horizontality, the role of cultural operators – including scholars – was inevitably shaped by institutional mandates, donor requirements and asymmetries of access to resources. While efforts were made to decentralize decision-making and support bottom-up initiatives (e.g., through open calls, direct collaborations, and shared use of space), the underlying structure remained embedded in a logic of *projectification*, which according to Jensen et al. tends to fragment continuity, instrumentalize participation, and prioritize visible outputs over long-term infrastructural change.

This dialectical framing also explains how our theoretical references intersect in practice: the Marxist critique reveals the projectification trap, self-management reminds us of both the potential and the pitfalls of institutionalized participation, cultural democracy expands the struggle over meaning, and PAR mediates these contradictions through prefigurative action.

In this context, cultural management faces a double bind. On one hand, it seeks to support democratic participation and community empowerment; on the other, it often operates within governance regimes that demand quantifiable deliverables, short timelines, and professionalized administration. The risk is that practices of self-governance – such as those tested in the reactivation of local community councils or the *Life in the Block* exhibition – become translated into formats legible to funders and institutions, thus losing their political edge and transformative potential. To avoid this trap, cultural managers and policymakers must critically engage with the limits of their own positionality, and ask how their actions may reproduce the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. This requires not only methodological reflexivity but also a shift in institutional priorities: from leadership to care, from efficiency to solidarity and from representation to direct participation.

The experience of EPICA suggests that integrating self-governance into cultural policy demands more than participatory formats – it demands a rethinking of institutions themselves. Can (cultural) institutions function as commons? Can they redistribute authority, budgets, and access meaningfully? Can cultural managers become facilitators of autonomy and not as implementers of capitalist state or market agendas? These are not merely rhetorical questions, but strategic challenges for the field moving forward. From a Marxist perspective, we argue that institutionalizing PAR in cultural policy requires more than methodological innovation – it demands a rupture with the political economy of projectification. So, future applications must confront: (1) how to sustain participation beyond funded cycles, (2) how to redistribute material resources (not just symbolic inclusion), and (3) how to transform institutions themselves into collectively governed social property. Without this, PAR risks becoming another *tyranny of participation* (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) that masks enduring inequalities.

The limits and potentials of participatory action research

Participatory action research was embraced by the EPICA project as a methodology capable of bridging the epistemic distance between researchers and communities, and of redistributing authority within the research process. The method was expected to generate a more democratic and egalitarian research practice – one in which knowledge is co-produced, action is shared, and reflection is collective. In practice, however, the operationalization of these ideals proved far more complex. While PAR's Freirean roots position it as a counterhegemonic praxis (Freire, 1970), its implementation under neoliberal project logic risks reducing participation to a technical exercise (Belfiore et al., 2023). As observed in another

case study of participatory cultural work in Serbia (Cigić et al., 2025), instead of developing long-term forms of co-governance, cultural institutions tend to commission "participatory" interventions that are often episodic, with limited redistribution of decision-making power. The EPICA case reveals this contradiction: despite co-designing actions with the community, structural asymmetries persisted – researchers held contractual power over budgets and timelines, while participants remained *stakeholders* rather than *co-owners*.

One of the central ethical dilemmas faced by the research team concerned the asymmetry between paid researchers and unpaid participants. While PAR theoretically dismantles hierarchies, the reality of donor-driven projects – including EPICA – frequently reproduces them. Researchers were institutionally contracted, budget holders, and agenda-setters. Despite good intentions and genuine commitment, their capacity to truly equalize relations was constrained by the structural features of the project: institutional expectations, timelines, deliverables, and legal responsibilities. The project budget was not a subject of joint deliberation with community members; even when discussed, it was rarely treated as a political resource to be collectively governed. This contradiction between participatory rhetoric and managerial constraints remains one of the core tensions of PAR under projectified cultural production - what Prnjat (2018: 111) identifies as the NGO trap where "independent cultural activists are forced to hyper production of projects, which only additionally increases administration and decreases the range of something that is perhaps primarily even conceived as a critical project". Like the EPICA team's struggle with donor reporting requirements, this "huge amount of administrative work [and] highly bureaucratized relationships" (Prnjat, 2018: 111) structurally distorts PAR's emancipatory potential into a market-compatible format.

Furthermore, the question of who was invited to participate – and on what terms – revealed deeper contradictions. While a range of grassroots stakeholders were consulted, including residents, informal building representatives, and NGO actors, the process of engagement was fragmented and uneven. The local municipality remained largely indifferent or selectively engaged, while some activists questioned the legitimacy of academic intervention in what they perceived as inherently political terrain. The process of "activation" itself, often taken for granted in PAR literature, proved to be a complex and time-consuming endeavour. Participation does not occur simply because it is invited; it requires pre-existing trust, shared language, and mutual stakes – none of which can be assumed in politically hostile or institutionally hollow environments.

Nonetheless, the Living Lab did reveal moments where PAR opened genuine possibilities for shared agency. For instance, the drafting of a list of potential candidates for local council elections emerged organically from collective reflection within focus groups, pointing to a form of political subjectivation that transcended academic facilitation. Similarly, the co-design of cultural programs, however modest, demonstrated that when resources – space, time, knowledge – are made available without predetermination, new alliances and capacities can emerge.

It can be concluded that Participatory Action Research (PAR) is, under conditions of projectification, structurally distorted. Capitalist project-based funding is fundamentally misaligned with the ethos of co-governance and unlikely to provide a genuinely enabling environment for processes such as direct democracy – unless participants share a strong sense of class consciousness and a collective motivation to move beyond the roles imposed by the project framework.

In relation to power imbalances – particularly regarding financial compensation – the EPICA project offers a concrete example. Following internal discussions that at times revealed antagonisms within the research group, the decision was not to fetishize balance but to foreground asymmetry as structurally shaped by budgetary and institutional frameworks. This was treated as a central object of analysis: PAR under such conditions remains embedded in broader systems of inequality. Its methodological challenges are thus not technical but structural, and the very attempt to practice PAR inevitably produces distortions. Success depends less on formal design and more on the researchers' critical awareness, honesty, and long-term commitment to the community. Participation, under market-driven conditions, becomes almost impossible in any meaningful, emancipatory sense.

Although the project itself did not produce far-reaching or easily measurable outcomes within the local community, it nonetheless holds significance in that it opened up space for political subjectivation. Notably, while concrete impacts may appear limited, it is important to acknowledge that this particular community later demonstrated a high level of self-organization, especially through the convening of local assemblies during the subsequent wave of student protests. What the EPICA initiative offered, then, was not a transformative intervention in the conventional project-based sense, but rather a prefigurative opening – a set of micro-events that created cracks in the dominant logic of community organization under neoliberal conditions. In this way, the process can be seen as contributing to the cultivation of alternative imaginaries and the capacity to envision different forms of collective life beyond the limits of market-based governance.

Conclusion: reclaiming cultural democracy as a practice of rupture

This article set out to present the EPICA project to an international audience of cultural policy and management scholars, especially those engaged in activism and social change, as a situated case of participatory action research in a

post-socialist context. While our analysis draws inspiration from the Yugoslav legacy of self-management, we do not propose its restoration as a ready-made model. As scholars such as Suvin have shown, it was marked by deep contradictions, technocratic drifts, and structural limits. Our aim here is to engage this legacy critically, as a resource for thinking about direct democracy today, while remaining attentive to its historical shortcomings and the challenges of its potential contemporary application. EPICA was conceived as a multi-year, interdisciplinary research process that combined mapping, co-design, implementation, and evaluation of cultural governance practices in Serbia, and especially in the New Belgrade context. PAR as its central methodological choice was also a political commitment: to co-create knowledge with communities, to intervene in local governance, and to explore the possibilities of direct democracy within and against the limits of neoliberal cultural policy. The choice of PAR was driven by the idea of reconnection with the legacy of Yugoslav self-management while responding to the current crisis of local institutions, social atomization, and technocratic governance.

Drawing on the EPICA project's engagement with New Belgrade's local community councils, we have demonstrated how PAR can serve as both a diagnostic tool and a prefigurative practice – exposing the contradictions of neoliberal cultural governance while creating provisional spaces for direct democracy. It is important to stress that the frameworks mobilized in this article do not collapse into a unified theoretical model. Their antagonisms are deliberate and necessary. Rather than producing a forced synthesis, we employ them dialectically to illuminate contradictions in cultural policy and to open prefigurative spaces for democratic experimentation.

Our findings reveal three critical insights that challenge conventional approaches to cultural policy and management:

First, the crisis of representative democracy and the erosion of local institutions, like local community councils in post-Yugoslav territories, are not merely structural problems but epistemic ones. The Yugoslav legacy of self-management, though diluted by decades of neoliberal restructuring, persists as a latent revolutionary potential – one that residents, artists, cultural workers and scholars should reclaim through collective practices of solidarity and direct action, however fragmented by capitalist realism. PAR's value lies in its capacity to expose these submerged trajectories of class struggle and connect them to contemporary movements for cultural and material emancipation.

Second, the tension between PAR's emancipatory aims and its implementation under project-based funding underscores a fundamental paradox: participatory methods risk reproducing the very inequalities they seek to dismantle when divorced from material redistribution. In EPICA, this manifested in the asymmetry between paid researchers and unpaid participants, as well as the temporal constraints of donor timelines. These

contradictions demand that scholars and practitioners confront their complicity in what Cooke and Kothari (2001) term the *tyranny of participation* – where inclusion becomes a procedural checkbox contrary to a redistribution of power. To move beyond this, PAR must be embedded in broader struggles for structural change – including the decommodification of cultural work and the collectivization of institutional resources.

Third, cultural democracy must be reimagined not as a stable endpoint but as a conflictual process rooted in what Majstorović (1977) called the *human content of all human rights*. The EPICA Living Lab's most significant outcome was not its formal outputs but its methodological disruptions: the informal council elections proposed by residents, the self-organized "Život u bloku" exhibition, and the collective mapping of legal barriers. These interventions, though modest, exemplify Hall's (1981) *interpretive struggle* in action – moments where cultural practice becomes a terrain for renegotiating the very meaning of democracy. Instead of seeking consensus or closure, cultural democracy in this view demands antagonism, contradiction, and the ongoing negotiation of collective life.

The challenge ahead is not to perfect PAR as a methodological toolkit but to confront the political-economic conditions that limit its radical potential. As the 2024 plenum movements in Serbia demonstrated, the demand for direct democracy persists even in hostile institutional environments. Future research must therefore grapple with a central question: How can cultural policy be reconfigured to sustain, rather than co-opt, such emergent practices? This will require a shift from managing participation to building infrastructures of care that redistribute decision-making power as well as material resources.

What remains undeniable is that EPICA's most vital lesson is that cultural democracy does not begin in official strategies or institutional declarations, but in the cracks of the existing order – in forgotten infrastructures, in contested spaces, in practices of collective defiance. It is there, in the reactivation of compromised yet symbolically charged sites like the local community council, that the promise of self-governance continues to echo – fragile, unfinished, but still politically imaginable.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the research and writing of the manuscript. The article incorporates insights

from the participatory action research conducted as part of the EPICA project, which involved contributions from other members of the EPICA research team. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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