

## PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN PROMOTING THE PRESERVATION OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS OF STARA PLANINA

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### ABSTRACT

Stara Planina (also known as the Balkan Mountain) is a protected area that predominantly spans across Bulgaria and partially into Serbia. It is renowned for its exceptional natural values, authentic landscapes, and rural settlements, which represent significant ambient (natural) and architectural heritage. However, these areas face ongoing depopulation. This paper focuses on three villages within the Serbian part of Stara Planina — Topli Do, Dojkinci, and Pakleštica. Specifically, it examines inclusive (participatory) practices implemented through various programs and events in recent years. The aim of the research is to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives in raising awareness of the significance of both architectural and ambient (natural) heritage, as well as promoting their preservation and restoration. Furthermore, the study explores how these practices revive a sense of community, encourage collaboration between professionals and local residents, and act as strategic showcases of the ecological and cultural values of rural settlements within this protected nature park. The findings aim to highlight the role of inclusive initiatives in maintaining the unique identity of Stara Planina's villages while ensuring sustainable rural development.

**KEYWORDS** \_ *Stara Planina, Inclusive practice, Ambient heritage, Rural development*

## INTRODUCTION

Civic and architectural initiatives are a type of activism that spreads the idea that architecture is an important factor in the development of society and that its preservation and maintenance can solve certain social, cultural, and even environmental problems. Such initiatives aim to improve the quality of life of the community, to bring expert knowledge closer to users, and to make users see the importance and complexity of the impact of the context in which they live on their daily lives. To implement participatory practices involving two or more different social groups, a previously established plan is required, the structure of which contains both theoretical foundations and gradual steps to be taken in practice. This enables an understanding of the goal of the practice and the methods that will be applied, as well as clarity in the distribution of tasks. In this paper, participatory practices will be analyzed through three case studies, three smaller villages located on Stara Planina in Serbia. These areas have fewer than 100 inhabitants and are highly vulnerable, primarily due to the problem of rapid depopulation, neglect and marginalization due to their position, i.e. inaccessibility and therefore invisibility for the competent institutions. The aim of the paper is to point out the practices that have taken place in these villages and to analyze the significance of their implementation.

## BRIEFLY ABOUT MOUNTAIN STARA PLANINA

Stara planina is part of the oldest land in the Balkans. Two-thirds of its surface is in Bulgaria, and one-third is in Serbia. On the territory of Serbia, this mountain was declared a nature park in 1997 and is under protection of the first category. In addition, several "strict nature reserves and natural rarities" are located in this area. Stara planina has specific flora and fauna. It contains endemic plant species, such as lincure (lat. *Gentiana lutea* & *Gentiana punctata*), rosulja (lat. *Drosera rotundifolia*), bor krivulj (lat. *Pinus mugo*; the smallest pine in Europe)... On this mountain, out of 160 recorded species of birds, 92 species are natural rarities. It also contains cultural and historical heritage, that is, the heritage of rural areas on this mountain. The villages are of compact type, and their urban-morphological organization was always "guided" by natural conditions, so individual authentic segments were formed. However, despite the recognition that this is a valuable heritage, these settlements are marginalized, and their residents are faced with problems of various kinds and often at a high level of complexity. A particular problem is that public institutions do not act adequately in their efforts to improve the quality of life of these small local communities, but rather view these areas from the perspective of potential exploitation of natural resources with major consequences for the context itself, but also for the great profit of the initiators of such projects.

## CASE STUDIES

In order to examine the impact of participatory action in smaller rural areas on Stara Planina, three case studies were selected, namely the villages of Topli Do, Dojkinci, and Pakleštica. The village of Topli Do (otherwise under protection as a cultural monument since 2021) was chosen as a site of activism against the installation of mini-hydroelectric power plants in the area. The other two villages were part of the project "Epica" (Empowering Participation in Culture and Architecture) and although the initiatives that will be analyzed are initiatives of the same project, they are still different. The aim is to examine the possibilities of participation and its contributions, which will be discussed.

**Table 1:** Data on analyzed villages

|                                   | Topli Do | Dojkinci | Pakleštica |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|------------|
| <b>Population (2011)</b>          | 51       | 176      | 32         |
| <b>Population (2022)</b>          | 33       | 93       | 20         |
| <b>Under protection</b>           | Yes      | No       | No         |
| <b>Contains a cultural centre</b> | Yes      | Yes      | Yes        |

### Case study I: Topli Do

The village of Topli Do is a protected area, because a large part of the architectural structures have remained identical for more than 100 years and provide a credible representation of authentic rural communities from the past. The village is reached by passing through the canyon of the Temštica River (known as the “Little Colorado”). This village is also special for the number of waterfalls of various characteristics (about 40). Precisely because of the abundance of water, investors have seen the potential to install mini-hydroelectric power plants of the diversion type there, which would directly disrupt the natural and architectural environment. Although the village has less than 50 inhabitants, with a predominantly elderly population, the local community independently organized the “protection” of the rivers in 2019. They were joined by residents of nearby villages, but also cities, members of various environmental organizations and scientific associates. Media attention and activity on social networks had a great impact, which provided the wider community with insight into the problems facing this village. Such a “virtual call to action” was of great importance.

Activism against the destruction of the natural environment has increased awareness of the importance of protecting this endangered area. The association “I Love Topli Do” was formed, whose goal is to preserve the heritage, develop tourism and popularize this area. This was followed by an initiative for the synchronized renovation of facades, in which the locals participated. Since the beginning of its activities, the association has initiated several projects that have been implemented, such as the renovation of the church and the mountain lodge. It was also decided to open a Museum of the Life of the Stara Planina Man in the oldest house in the village, where visitors could learn more about this area. The locals have also declared one part of it a “free eco-zone” where limited construction is planned in harmony with nature. This type of participatory practice, which involves networking people “for defense and activation of public resources”, belongs to the grassroots and bottom-up initiatives, the main characteristic of which is “direct self-organized complex defense action”.

In order to maintain the connection of the local community with other communities and individuals who supported them in the first initiative, but also to introduce other people to this area, the “Festival of Free Rivers and Mountains” was launched. The program encourages participatory practices such as art workshops (creating music and film works with a focus on ecology and rural areas), a photography exhibition, hiking and other recreational collective activities. This has increased the number of visitors to the area.



**Figure 1:** Topli Do (left), Joint initiative against mini-hydropower plants (right) (source: <https://www.filminserbia.com/>; <https://www.bbc.com/>)

### Case study II: Dojkinci

As part of the Epica project, two projects were implemented in the village of Dojkinci between 2018. and 2021, in which students of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade participated as part of the elective course Architects and Civic Initiatives. Through the collaboration of students, professors and the local community of the village, a project to restore the village cultural center was

implemented, and since the village dairy project was supposed to take place in 2021. during the pandemic, the specific project was not implemented in practice. In order for the students to become familiar with the location, it was necessary to conduct research that included an analysis of natural and architectural units, the way the community functions, their cultural heritage... Also, these first phases of work included getting to know possible initiatives, the planning framework, the budget... Then, a three-day workshop was organized where students, together with professors, got to know the community and compared previous theoretical knowledge with the situation at the specifically selected location. In order to avoid mistakes in the conceptualization of the project work, a research unit was organized that included an analysis of good and bad practices that had some similarities with the village of Dojkinci (for example, these could be: similar types of problems, level of development, terrain configuration...). After such preparation, in cooperation with the local community, proposals are collected that would enable the preservation of the village and try to improve the quality of life. Then, the proposals and expected results were adopted, which, before the actual implementation, were presented to the general public – primarily in order to obtain the opinion of more citizens, that is, the wider community, but also in order to promote the idea of unification and work on preserving this village. In order for the project to be implemented, it was necessary to collect the consents of the competent institutions and material resources. Then, the local community initiated the process of implementing the project according to the designed work plan, in which, in addition to students and professors, individual construction initiatives also participated voluntarily.

During the first such practice, when the focus was on the cultural center, a lecture was also held on the impact of mini-hydroelectric power plants on the Stara Planina precinct and on the potential that this area offers, thereby indicating that preserving the architectural heritage and not preserving the natural one makes the concept of nurturing the authenticity of this rural area meaningless, because the protection of the context should not be selective. In practice, the project involved the construction of an art installation “Identity Wall” that highlights the components of the identity of the place (natural environment, cultural and architectural heritage, local community). Then, on the floor of the large hall of the cultural center, a Pirot carpet (srb. *pirotski čilim*) was painted as a protected intangible cultural asset of Serbia by UNESCO, which is characteristic of this region. The locals also renovated the floor, windows and roof of the cultural center in accordance with the plan. The implementation took several months. It is important to note that these are only planned works with the aim of long-term improvement of a segment of the residents' lives, but they also included preparing meals, organizing accommodation...

These practices were covered by the media, and the work processes were also presented on the “Stara kao nova” and “Epica project” social media profiles, which also included a different audience. The detailed procedure for the preparation and implementation of this inclusive practice was published in the practicum of 2023.



**Figure 2:** Dojkinci (left), Joint work on the implementation of the project (right) (source: <https://sr.wikipedia.org/>; <https://www.arh.bg.ac.rs/>)

### Case study III: Pakleštica

Given that they were part of the same project, in the village of Pakleštica, the primary participants in the analyzed participatory practices were the local community of the village and students and professors of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade, with the exception that in this village the subject of work was a village school and a village dairy. And in the example of inclusive practice in this village, heterogeneous teams of people were involved. The project on which these teams worked is the renovation and transformation of a village school that was built in 1923. and has not been active since 1986. The project task and design solution were developed precisely in the community, by experts in collaboration with the local population. The project aimed to protect the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that this school possesses as an important segment in the urban context, and above all in the development of the village identity. The renovation involved the rehabilitation of the structure, floors, windows... Also, a project for a network of *Green Trails* was developed, which was conceived as the implementation of eco-cultural routes around the village and the village itself. The goal of this project was to create a tourist attraction in the village, or rather, to connect existing natural and cultural attractions in a planned manner. Also, two wall installations were to be created that represented the aspiration for development, not stagnation, of this area. In this project, the legal framework was important, because despite joint cooperation, the right to use the school was not obtained. Therefore, the focus was shifted to the renovation and adaptation of the village dairy with a similar concept. This project was successfully implemented, although it also contained complications in the administrative context. The dairy space was adapted into the village community centre and the village museum. A space has been created for locals to gather, but also a space that tourists can visit and learn about the history and traditions of this small village.

This inclusive practice also received media attention, and at the same time, the work on the project was displayed on the social media profiles of "Stara kao nova" and "Epica project" in order to provide support, invite people to cooperate, or simply inform that such practices are taking place in these areas. Promotional campaigns were also organized to raise funds for the implementation of the planned projects, and the village hall of this village also has its own page on social networks. The detailed process of preparing and implementing this inclusive practice was published in the practicum in 2023. Motivated by the successful implementation, the residents of this village subsequently specified and implemented new projects important for the improvement of their community, such as equipping a children's playground, jointly cleaning rivers, installing green containers...



**Figure 3:** Pakleštica (left), View of the realized project segment (right) (source: <https://www.pirotskevesti.rs/>; <https://www.facebook.com/>)

### DISCUSSION

Given the insight into the number of inhabitants (Table 1), it is clear that the population of these specific areas, and therefore their conservation, is extremely endangered. By encouraging inclusive practices in these areas of Stara Planina, the locals are primarily shown that they are visible, that they are not neglected. Particularly important in this ecological and social context is the initiative in

Topli Do, where people came to support the locals in their fight for the survival of their habitat. Such a partly spontaneous initiative is of great importance. On the other hand, inclusive practices as part of professional projects also have positive effects on the local community - they provide communication through respect for the needs, habits and attitudes of the residents.

The renovation and adequate arrangement of cultural centers, schools and other gathering spaces for today's small number of residents improves the quality of their daily life, more precisely the segment of free time and time for socializing and personal development. This, of course, represents the solution of only a certain part of their problems that they face. However, they are not negligible. By renovating existing buildings with the help of experts and donations, i.e. the necessary material resources, the architectural heritage of public use in rural areas is preserved. Since public use buildings in the village are rare, i.e. there is often only one example of a certain public use (one cultural center, one school, one church), it is of utmost importance to document, but also preserve them and thus maintain the urban volumetrics of mountain villages.

Since it is equally important to maintain the natural environment of these small settlements, as an initial initiative it is sufficient to simply preserve the existing one, that is, to "defend" nature from major changes that the human factor would tend to significantly change, as the initiative in Topli Dol has shown. These are important steps in creating a constant and more complex practice and motivation towards joint heritage preservation. Through the analyzed examples of Topli Dol and Pakleštica, it is seen that previously set plans can be changed in practice due to unforeseen circumstances (which can be weather, administrative, etc.). Spontaneous, relatively fast, but effective action allows us to continue moving towards affirmative goals, while additionally strengthening community. Such approaches show that this type of cooperation improves social communication precisely by emphasizing constructive dialogues between different groups, because this encourages and practices listening to interlocutors, understanding and creating critical opinions. Although the projects are not large-scale, the conceptual plans set out have been mostly implemented, which shows that social networking and communication between a large number of people actually produces results and thus encourages communities (whether civil or professional) to continue working in that direction.

The presentation and publication of these implemented projects, as was done in the case of Dojkinci, and Pakleštica, is also important, because it shows the wider public the success of such practices, but also points out the problems and their possible solutions. On the other hand, the activism in Topli Dol was not publicized in this way, but it was covered by the media, which also brings certain benefits. Presence on social networks in today's modern world is important in order for these areas to be noticed and attract visitors, and this was done in all three case studies.

## CONCLUSIONS

Participative action, bringing together professional staff, i.e. people specialized in certain fields (architecture, urbanism, sociology...) and users, i.e. members of the local community acts as a combination that needs to be applied more often with constant elaboration of strategies, development of more detailed and complex plans for the improvement of rural areas. The opinion of the local community is of great importance for the creation of a design tailored to the natural environment, precisely because the people living in that area know its structure and want to preserve it, it can be said that they are mostly co-existed with it. Nevertheless, the necessity of motivating the population to improve their quality of life is recognized. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to subsidize such projects. Precisely, because material resources are of essential importance for the improvement of these areas. The local community, even when it perceives certain problems, can verbalize them, but not solve them in an adequate way. The help of experts would mean that the obtained subsidies are used as economically as possible, and the project is long-term for use, on the other hand, communication with the community enables a faster solution to the problem.

By implementing such inclusive, or participatory, practices, the general public is introduced to the possibilities of action, the way in which they can independently launch new initiatives, the community is encouraged to contact experts without hesitation, and it is precisely through these collaborations that the community learns to notice some problems that it had not previously recognized. Furthermore, citizens in a community that offers understanding, acceptance, and strives towards the same goal, namely the preservation of architectural and natural heritage, are encouraged to apply more frequent variations of such inclusive practices towards the preservation of endangered areas.

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