Public Participation in Question: Urban Planning Frameworks and Informal Practices in Skopje

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Abstract

Public participation is a central principle of inclusive urban planning, supported by international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11, the EU Directive on Public Participation, the EU Urban Agenda, and the New Leipzig Charter. However, in post-socialist cities like Skopje, the practical application of participation remains limited and uneven. This study critically examines how public participation is framed, implemented, and experienced in Skopje's urban planning through empirical research conducted between 2022 and 2024. It evaluates both formal mechanisms, including public consultations and regulatory procedures, as well as informal civic initiatives.

Findings reveal a fragmented participatory landscape: while participatory mechanisms are legally embedded, they remain limited in scope and function largely as instruments of procedural compliance. In contrast, informal civic initiatives have taken on a more active role, combining public outreach, educational campaigns and digital tools to influence planning decisions and raise public awareness. The study suggests that advancing towards proactive and inclusive participation will require planning institutions to recognise and integrate these informal practices, while providing accessible tools and structured support that allow citizens to translate lived experience into actionable input.

Keywords: public participation; civic engagement; urban planning; civic initiatives; Skopje.

Introduction

The evolving discourse on public participation in urban planning, both within professional practice and among the wider public, has gained significant momentum in recent years. International frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 (United Nations, 2015), the EU Directive on Public Participation (European Union, 2003), the EU Urban Agenda (European Union, 2016), and the New Leipzig Charter (European Union, 2020) position public participation as a fundamental principle of sustainable urban development. Yet, despite its prominence in these agendas, there has been limited critical assessment of how participation is applied in practice and whether it fulfils its intended role, particularly in the post-socialist cities of former Yugoslavia. This issue is especially relevant for North Macedonia, a candidate member state of the European Union since 2005, where planning frameworks are expected to align with EU standards while navigating

complex local governance realities.

Despite its policy prominence, academic work on participation in post-socialist cities in former Yugoslavia remains relatively scarce. An exception marks the study by Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić and Nikšič (2021), which examined participatory models in Ljubljana and Zagreb, pointing to both their potential and their limitations. Yet, no comparable research has addressed participation in Skopje, where planning processes continue to be shaped by decentralisation reforms, limited institutional capacity, and contested governance structures. The aim of this study is to critically examine the mechanisms, limitations, and lived realities of participatory planning in Skopje, situating them within the broader post-socialist governance context and identifying conditions that could support more meaningful citizen engagement. It argues that participatory planning is shaped by a modest legal framework, an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus, and growing public concern over urban quality of life (Janev, 2011), while also highlighting the role of citizen education in enabling meaningful engagement.

The research was conducted in two interrelated phases between 2022 and 2024, within the boundaries of Skopje, and considered a five-year period of public works (2018–2023) as a broader context for analysis. The first phase focused on evaluating the extent and evolution of public participation in urban planning processes from 1958[1] until 2024, tracing and analysing both formal and informal mechanisms of public participation. This phase relied on the analysis of urban planning legislation, municipal documents, and planning reports, as well as mapping the informal modes of civic participation, as a response to the formal limitations. The second phase adopted a more exploratory approach through a series of participatory workshops, where a selected number of citizens were encouraged to observe, interpret, and represent their immediate environments. These workshops combined field observation, participatory mapping, and focus-group discussions to capture lived spatial experiences and perceptions of public space. The two phases were methodologically linked, with insights from the first informing the design and thematic framing of the second.

Findings from the study highlight the absence of structured public participation in urban planning processes, as well as the lack of official tools to support and strengthen such engagement. At the same time, the research revealed both the creative potential and the constraints citizens face without adequate technical or institutional support. In this context, the study also offers insights into how more accessible and inclusive tools, particularly those developed by civic initiatives, could foster well-informed, proactive citizenship, ultimately encouraging broader and more sustained public participation.

Theoretical perspectives on public participation in urban planning

Inclusive urban planning has the potential to strengthen the relationship between residents and their physical and social environments, thereby contributing to the development of socially resilient neighbourhoods. Participation is increasingly recognised as central to this process, both in theory and in practice. For the purposes of this study, a distinction is made between **public participation**, understood as state-led and legally mandated mechanisms such as consultations, surveys, and hearings, and **civic engagement**, which encompasses civic initiatives, activism, and informal practices outside institutional frameworks. While the former is often framed as compliance with policy requirements, the latter reflects citizen-led efforts to assert influence and shape urban development. This distinction is central to the study's design, which evaluates how these two forms of participation interact in shaping Skopje's urban planning landscape.

International policy frameworks position public participation as a central principle of inclusive urban development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11 calls to "make cities and

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1   1958 marks the adoption of the first Law on Urban Planning in the then People's Republic of Macedonia.

human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (United Nations, 2015, p. 14). The EU Directive on Public Participation seeks to "ensure effective public participation in the preparation of certain plans and programmes relating to the environment" (European Union, 2003, p. 18). More recent policy agendas reinforce this orientation, with the EU Urban Agenda aiming to "promote cooperation between Member States, cities, the European Commission and other stakeholders" (European Union, 2016, p. 3) and the New Leipzig Charter emphasising "the transformative power of cities for the common good" (European Union, 2020, p. 2). While these frameworks firmly establish participation as a normative goal, academic debates have questioned how far such aspirations translate into practice, particularly in contexts where institutional, social, and political constraints limit the depth and effectiveness of civic engagement.

From a Foucauldian perspective, participation is not inherently emancipatory but can function as a subtle mechanism of control. Foucault (1991) argues that modern governance operates not only through formal institutions but through diffuse techniques that shape how individuals perceive and conduct themselves. Within this framework, participatory processes, though framed as inclusive, often limit public agency by structuring input within predefined institutional norms. Rather than dismantling hierarchies, such mechanisms may reproduce them, turning participation into a technology of governmentality that fosters self-regulating rather than empowered publics (Foucault, 2008). In this context, understanding public participation in urban planning requires a critical examination of the various forms it can take, including those that may appear inclusive on the surface but lack substantive openness and influence.

This distinction between symbolic inclusion and genuine empowerment is central to planning theory, most notably in Arnstein's work. Arnstein (1969) argued that "there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process". Her "ladder of participation" illustrates eight levels of engagement, ranging from non-participation at the lower rungs, where involvement legitimises decisions already taken, to *tokenism* in the middle, where citizens may be heard but lack authority to shape outcomes. True participation begins only at the upper rungs, where power is shared and decision-making becomes collaborative. Arnstein's typology offers a direct lens for assessing whether participation is genuinely inclusive and impactful or merely symbolic.

Later scholars have critiqued Arnstein's linear and hierarchical model, proposing more nuanced approaches. Fung (2006) introduced the "democracy cube," which maps participation across three dimensions: who is involved, how communication and decision-making occur, and what level of authority is granted. Cornwall (2008) similarly stresses that the meaning and value of participation vary across contexts, shaped not only by formal structures but also by social relations, cultural norms, and lived experiences. These perspectives highlight that participation cannot be judged solely by formal levels of power but must be understood as an iterative and context-sensitive practice. For this study, Fung and Cornwall provide analytical tools to explore the real-world implications of participation for communities, by recognising that inclusion may take different forms and generate varying effects depending on local governance traditions and everyday practices.

Alongside these theoretical debates, Irvin and Stansbury (2004) emphasise the practical trade-offs of participation. They argue that while inclusive processes can build legitimacy, trust, and civic capacity, they also carry significant costs. Participation requires time and resources, and it may be captured by vocal interest groups, producing frustration when citizen input is disregarded. Their analysis speaks directly to the research question of how planners justify the continued use of participation despite persistent challenges, emphasising that participation can be both enabling and burdensome. It also shifts attention from ideals of empowerment to the balance between benefits and limitations in practice, a perspective particularly relevant for contexts where institutional capacity is weak and resources are limited.

Despite the widespread integration of participatory initiatives into planning practice, public participation remains one of its most complex and contested dimensions. According to O'Hare (2021), planners often face the paradox of encouraging meaningful involvement from a public that is either distrustful or disengaged, while also managing vocal and conflicting stakeholder interests. While participation is promoted as a democratic ideal, it frequently raises questions about its effectiveness, cost, and even its authenticity. This tension prompts a critical reflection: if public input is essential to shaping our cities, why is there so little emphasis on educating citizens about the planning processes that affect their everyday lives?

The limitations of participation are also evident in the study of Hordijk et al. (2015), which highlights the gap between the normative framing of participation in governance agendas and its practical implementation. Their work shows that while participatory instruments are often introduced to promote inclusiveness and legitimacy, they risk becoming tokenistic if citizens' contributions are not meaningfully integrated into decision-making. This perspective links closely to the research question of how participatory instruments operate in practice, especially in contexts where governance cultures, such as those in Skopje, formally endorse participation but rarely allow it to alter outcomes. Their findings underline the importance of assessing not only procedures but also substantive impacts in evaluating participatory processes.

These perspectives suggest that participation is best understood not as a linear pathway towards empowerment, but as a set of practices shaped by institutional arrangements, political culture, and practical constraints. This study draws on these insights to critically examine how participation is framed and enacted in Skopje, and to explore the extent to which participatory mechanisms in a post-socialist context foster meaningful engagement or reinforce existing hierarchies.

Legal framework governing urban planning and overview of the formal and informal modes of public participation in urban planning processes in North Macedonia

The legal framework governing urban planning in North Macedonia outlines both the mechanisms and scope of public participation. Opportunities for involvement are formally granted to residents and direct users of planned urban areas; however, these are typically confined to the final phases of the planning process. Broader public participation in earlier stages, particularly in shaping the planning programme, which should ideally reflect community needs, is largely absent. Although participatory planning has been legally enabled since 1958, its practical implementation has undergone significant shifts, marked by alternating periods of advancement and constraint through various legal and procedural adjustments.

Public participation in planning, though conceptually familiar, remains a relatively recent addition to the planning process. The possibility for public engagement was first introduced within professional planning procedures through the 1958 Law on Urban Planning. Out of a total of 32 articles, three were specifically dedicated to public participation, providing detailed provisions on the modes and procedures for citizen involvement. Subsequent legislation, including the 1965 Law on Regional, Spatial and Urban Planning, the 1975 Law on Spatial and Urban Planning, and the 1985 Law on the System of Spatial and Urban Planning, significantly redefined the framework for public participation by delegating this responsibility to the municipalities, yet without offering clear guidelines for the implementation of this legal obligation.

However, despite these limitations, the 1985 Law on the System of Spatial and Urban Planning introduced, for the first time, a Council for Spatial and Urban Planning composed of scientists, experts and public servants. Appointed by the assembly of the socio-political community and relevant state bodies, the council served as a precursor to the participatory body later formalised in the 1996 Law on Spatial and Urban Planning. The 1996 law not only established this participatory body

but also defined a public participation model drawing on the 1958 framework, opening membership to all citizens rather than limiting it to experts. The 2005 Law on Spatial and Urban Planning expanded public participation by introducing participatory bodies within municipalities, alongside mandatory public presentations and surveys, marking a significant step towards more substantive and accountable public engagement. However, these provisions were partially revoked with the adoption of the 2014 Law on Spatial and Urban Planning.

In an effort to improve interinstitutional coordination and transparency, the *e-urbanism* system was introduced in 2015. As stipulated in Article 37, Paragraph 5 of the Law on Urban Planning, the system was intended to provide the public with free and open access to key phases of the urban planning process. Additionally, it was expected to ensure public access to all adopted urban plans. In practice, however, these provisions remain largely unimplemented. To this day, the *e-urbanism* system does not provide open and free access to the urban planning process for the general public, thereby reinforcing existing barriers to public engagement and undermining the system's intended role in fostering transparency and inclusion.

Today, formal public participation in urban planning processes, particularly in the adoption of detailed urban plans, is structured through institutional mechanisms primarily regulated by the 2020 Law on Spatial and Urban Planning. Participation is facilitated through public surveys on both General and Detailed Urban Plans, as well as through the participatory body, which may include civic representatives. However, the selection process for members of the participatory body is not clearly or transparently regulated, and their role remains solely consultative.

Table 1

Overview of legal provisions for public participation in the urban planning adoption process (1958–Present)

Year of Adoption	Name of Law	Article	Summary
1958	Law on Urban Planning	Articles 10, 11 and 12	The law provides for official participation in urban planning through public inspection and the collection of comments and proposals from citizens over a period of 30 to 60 days; however, their role remains consultative, with no guarantee that this input will influence the final decision.
1965	Law on Regional, Spatial, and Urban Planning	Article 11	The law provides for public inspection as part of the procedure for adopting regional and urban plans; however, the manner in which the inspection is conducted is left to the discretion of municipal assemblies, which can result in inconsistency and limited public participation.
1973	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Article 29	The law mandates compulsory public inspection at all phases of spatial and urban planning; however, leaving the determination of procedures to local assemblies may lead to varying levels of transparency and citizen involvement.
1985	Law on the System of Spatial and Urban Planning	Articles 27, 28, 31, and 33	The legal framework provides for the formation of councils and mandatory public debates as mechanisms for social influence in spatial and urban planning; however, the method of implementation is delegated to municipal authorities, which can result in inconsistent application of participatory practices.
1996	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Articles 17 and 18	Legal provisions allow for public surveys and expert debates within the urban planning process, enabling public participation through written remarks; however, this participation is time-limited and predominantly advisory in nature.

Year of Adoption	Name of Law	Article	Summary
2005	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Article 17, Paragraph (5), Articles 23 and 24	The latest legal amendments expand public participation through the establishment of participatory bodies within municipalities, mandatory public presentations and surveys, and the requirement to publish transparent reports including written responses to submitted remarks. These mechanisms represent significant progress towards more substantive and accountable citizen involvement in urban planning, addressing the procedural formality and limitations of previous participatory models.
2014	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Article 35	The new provisions in Article 35 make the processes of public survey and public presentation more detailed, time-bound and technologically advanced through the integration of the e-urbanism system. The legal framework enables a combined approach to public participation by allowing both written and electronic submissions, alongside proactive and transparent communication via official gazettes and digital platforms. It also mandates responses to all submitted survey sheets and requires the repetition of the process if public comments result in significant changes to the plan. These measures represent a notable advancement towards inclusive, accountable and digitally enabled urban planning, with clearly defined deadlines, procedures and institutional responsibilities.
2020	Law on Urban Planning	Article 27, Paragraphs (5), (6), and (7), and Article 46	Articles 27 and 46 of the law provide for expanded public involvement in the urban planning process through the organisation of a public survey lasting between 30 and 90 days, depending on the complexity of the planning area, as well as a public presentation of the proposed plan. In addition, the formation of a participatory body composed of representatives from local government, civic associations, urban and local communities, experts and activists is intended to ensure continuous, consultative and transparent community engagement throughout all phases of the preparation and adoption of urban plans.

Despite being legally mandated, official mechanisms are often perceived as procedural formalities rather than tools for meaningful engagement. Their formality stems from the way participation is embedded in legislation: procedures are highly standardised, time-bound, and primarily designed to ensure compliance with statutory requirements rather than to facilitate genuine dialogue. Short consultation periods, ineffective communication strategies, and limited responsiveness from public authorities further reinforce this perception. Moreover, the *e-urbanism* system, introduced to improve transparency, represents a missed opportunity, as it still does not allow electronic submission of surveys—the only officially prescribed mode of public participation—leaving this phase of the process digitally excluded and public involvement further constrained.

In response to the shortcomings of formal processes, a vibrant landscape of informal civic activism has emerged over the years, particularly in Skopje and other urban centres. These civic initiatives and civil society organisations have played a crucial role in advocating for the public interest and, as a result, have contributed to more inclusive and transparent participatory practices.

Year of Adoption	Name of Law	Public participation	Expert council	Participatory body
1958	Law on Urban Planning	Yes	No	No
1965	Law on Regional, Spatial, and Urban Planning	Limited	No	No
1973	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Limited	No	No
1985	Law on the System of Spatial and Urban Planning	Limited	Yes	No
1996	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Yes	No	Yes
2005	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Yes	No	Yes
2014	Law on Spatial and Urban Planning	Yes	No	No
2020	Law on Urban Planning	Yes	No	Yes

Evaluation of the contextual application of public participation in urban planning

The first phase of the research focused on analysing existing models of public participation in urban planning, addressing both official mechanisms and informal practices. It explored how participatory planning has been conceptualised from 1958 to the present, and the extent to which shifts in the regulatory framework have influenced citizens' rights to take part in these processes (Tables 1 and 2). In addition, an overview of both officially and unofficially implemented participatory practices was compiled, based on information obtained from the relevant municipalities and other sources (Table 3).

Fig. 1

Municipal map of Skopje
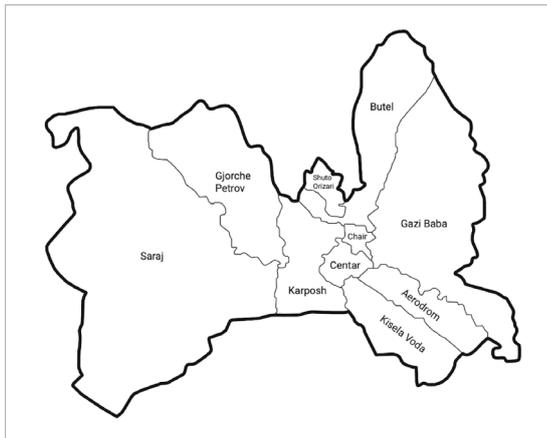
To understand current planning dynamics in Skopje's ten municipalities (Fig. 1), requests for free access to information of public character were submitted to obtain data on all urban plans adopted between 2018 and 2023, along with the number of formal objections filed for each plan. Even after exhausting all formal procedures, three municipalities failed to provide the requested information. Moreover, limited or no data were available on their official websites, despite the legal obligation to make such information publicly accessible. In total, 42 detailed urban plans were adopted between 2018 and 2023 across Skopje's ten municipalities, with an additional 88 plans in the process of adoption. While the number of formal objections is notably high in certain municipalities, these are largely concentrated around a small number of plans.

For example, in the Municipality of Centar, 513 out of 698 submitted surveys concerned just four adopted plans, while only 185 surveys were submitted for the remaining eight, indicating a disproportionate pattern of public participation. A similar trend is evident in the Municipality of Aerodrom, where 525 out of 562 submitted surveys were related to a single plan. In the Municipality of Gjorche Petrov, 288 out of 299 surveys for four adopted plans focused on only two, with the remaining two receiving just 11 surveys combined. This uneven distribution continues with plans still in the adoption phase: of 279 submitted surveys across seven plans, 268 pertain to only two. These patterns suggest that public participation tends to be reactive and issue-specific, often prompted by plans perceived as particularly contentious, rather than reflecting a consistent or systematic participatory practice.

Municipality	Population according to the 2021 census	Number of adopted plans and plans in the process of adoption	Total number of submitted surveys	Formal civic engagement as a percentage (%) of the population
Aerodrom	77 735	23	563	0.7%
Butel	37 968	no information	no information	no information
Gazi Baba	69 626	38	255	0.4%
Gjorche Petrov	44 844	13	578	1.3%
Karposh	63 760	8	no information	no information
Kisela Voda	61 965	25	226	0.4%
Saraj	38 399	0	0	n/a
Centar	43 893	13	974	2.2%
Chair	62 586	no information	no information	no information
Shuto Orizari	25 726	10	69	0.3%

Table 3

Municipal overview of public participation through official mechanisms of participation (2018-2023)

The observed, albeit uneven, rise in public participation cannot be attributed to improvements in formal participatory frameworks but rather to the persistent efforts of civic initiatives and activism. These efforts signal a broader shift from reactive opposition to proactive forms of urban citizenship. Civic organisations are increasingly combining digital tools, community education and legal instruments to monitor planning processes, mobilise residents and assert the public interest. While formal mechanisms remain bureaucratically constrained, civic action is reshaping public discourse and strengthening demands for transparent, participatory and accountable planning practices.

In parallel, a database of local initiatives and related activities conducted between 2018 and 2023 was compiled to explore how informal initiatives contribute to civic engagement and to assess their capacity to foster public participation in urban planning processes (**Fig. 2 and 3**). The dataset includes actions from 26 different civic initiatives and organisations, documenting 84 events across Skopje, all related to issues of urban planning and development. These activities range from petitions and protests to educational workshops, institutional dialogues and creative awareness campaigns. By categorising the events by type, timing, organisational origin and municipal distribution, the analysis offers an overview of how civic activism in the field of urban planning has shaped public discourse in recent years.

The titles of activities documented in the dataset reflect both the thematic focus and strategic framing of civic initiatives in Skopje. Many take the form of direct appeals, slogans or imperatives, such as "Fight for Vlae", "Greenery, not concrete!", "Save Vodno" and "For a nursery [Rasadnik] of opportunities", signalling environmental concerns and calls for collective action. Several titles reference specific neighbourhoods, highlighting the localised and community-based character of the initiatives. Examples such as "Vlae", "Centar" and "Rasadnik" demonstrate how activism is often rooted in place and shaped by spatial context. Collectively, these titles reflect a civic discourse that is place-based, politically assertive and increasingly professionalised.

The findings reveal a diverse and sustained civic presence in the public life of Skopje. While no single organisation dominates the landscape, groups such as Green Humane City, Chance for Centar and O2 Initiative stand out as consistently active. The most common forms of engagement include petitions, protests and public gatherings, indicating a reliance on both institutional channels and street-level mobilisation. Peaks in activity occurred in 2021 and 2023, suggesting heightened public concern likely linked to municipal decisions or development projects. Spatially, civic actions were concentrated in central and high-density areas, with Centar, Karposh and Aerodrom emerging as key sites of mobilisation. A notable trend is the increasing use of digital tools and platforms,

not only to inform but also to engage citizens in planning processes. Green Humane City developed the Skopje Passport platform to inform and educate residents about neighbourhood conditions and the quality of public spaces. Chance for Centar employed Google Maps to publicly list all active building permits and construction sites in the Municipality of Centar. Similarly, the AirCare application, created by one of Green Humane City's co-founders, allows users to monitor air quality in urban areas and identify potential sources of pollution. These examples illustrate an expanding repertoire of civic action that complements traditional protest with knowledge-based and monitoring practices, signalling a gradual diversification of participatory strategies. Taken together, they suggest that informal civic initiatives play a critical role in shaping debates on urban development and indicate that their sustained presence may serve as a counterweight to institutional shortcomings, potentially providing a foundation for more inclusive and effective participatory planning.
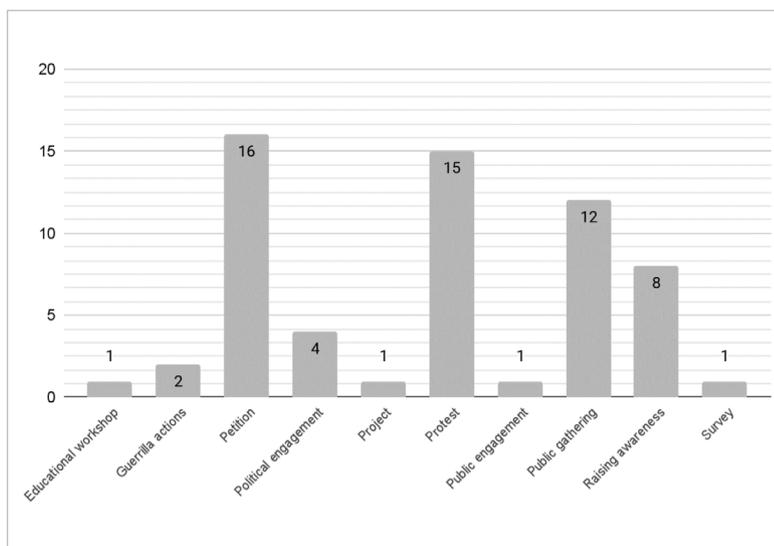
Fig. 2

Total number of civic activities over time and place in Skopje (2018-2023)
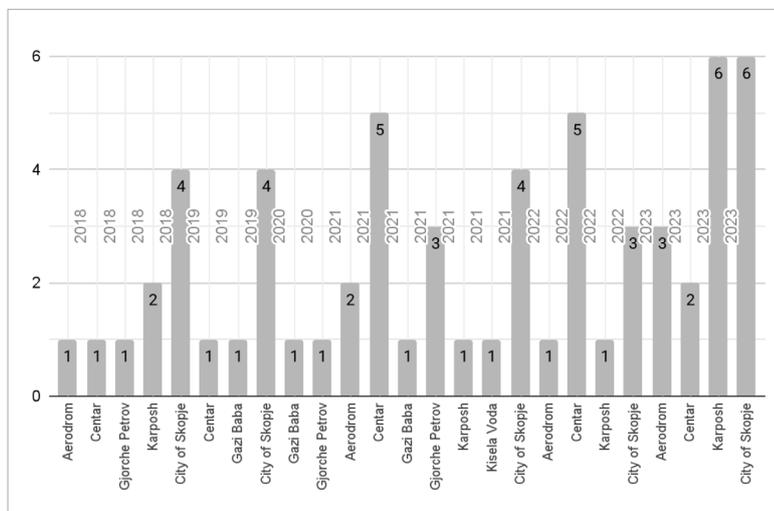
Fig. 3

Overview of the most common forms of civic engagement in Skopje (2018-2023)

Evaluation of the citizens' ability to perceive, observe and interpret

The second phase of the research focused on assessing citizens' ability to perceive, observe and interpret their immediate surroundings, with particular focus on open public spaces such as streets, parks, playgrounds, pedestrian connections and in-between spaces. While the first phase examined participation through both formal and informal mechanisms, this phase turned toward the individual scale, exploring how people make sense of, value, and relate to the environments they inhabit. Participatory mapping was adopted as the principal method, as it enables participants to translate lived experience into spatial form, making personal and collective perceptions visible and open to dialogue. The approach was grounded in the assumption that spatial perception and interpretive capacity are prerequisites for meaningful engagement, enabling citizens to move beyond tokenistic consultation towards more substantive forms of participation.

Following a public call, two consecutive workshops were organised, bringing together ten participants selected to ensure balanced representation in gender, age, education and professional background. The process was introduced through an open event that presented examples of participatory practice and invited participants to reflect on how they might contribute to improving the spatial quality of their neighbourhoods. Each participant created a personalised map of their surroundings using a method or medium they found most intuitive. The workshops concluded with group discussions that encouraged the exchange of perspectives and collective reflection, offering insight into how individuals perceive and articulate their spatial experiences outside formal participatory frameworks.

Although not all visual materials could be reproduced for publication, the accompanying discussions and written reflections provided rich qualitative data. Several participants expressed strong emotional attachments to specific micro-locations such as local parks, corners of frequent social interaction or tree-lined streets, while others focused on the lack of amenities, the neglect of shared spaces and the dominance of cars in pedestrian areas. The resulting maps revealed a fragmented understanding of the urban environment, often confined to daily routes or immediate surroundings, with wider spatial relations remaining less apparent. These findings highlight both the potential and the limitation of citizen mapping: while it effectively uncovers lived experiences and tacit knowledge, it also exposes gaps in spatial literacy that hinder a systemic understanding of the urban environment.

To further contextualise these observations, a series of focus-group discussions was organised, bringing together participants from the workshops. These discussions provided an opportunity to reflect collectively on experiences of participation and on perceptions of institutional openness to citizen input. The conversations revealed a general scepticism toward existing participatory mechanisms, which were perceived as largely procedural rather than substantive. Participants described a sense of consultation fatigue, noting that feedback was rarely incorporated into planning outcomes. Nevertheless, several expressed willingness to engage when participation was connected to tangible improvements in their immediate surroundings, suggesting that trust and sustained involvement could be strengthened through visible, locally relevant results.

However, the gap between perception and articulation became evident when participants attempted to convey their insights in ways that could inform planning processes. Without accessible visualisation tools or a shared spatial vocabulary, most relied on anecdotal evidence or descriptive narratives rather than analytical reasoning. This limitation emphasises the need for structured support through guided facilitation, targeted training and the development of adaptable, user-friendly participatory instruments. Such measures could help citizens translate everyday observations into forms legible to planning institutions, bridging the gap between lived experience and professional discourse.

Conclusion

This research examined the state and potential of participatory urban planning in Skopje through a two-phase methodology that investigated legal frameworks, civic activism and spatial perception. The findings reveal a participatory landscape shaped by regulatory constraints, uneven institutional responsiveness and emerging civic capacities, highlighting the need for more inclusive, informed and structurally supported models of public participation.

The first phase identified a fragmented and often reactive pattern of citizen engagement. Although legal mechanisms for participation exist, their implementation remains inconsistent across municipalities, with marked disparities in access to planning documents and responsiveness to public objections. The analysis of 130 urban plans adopted or reviewed between 2018 and 2023 showed that mobilisation is largely issue-driven, clustering around controversial projects. Participatory procedures thus function mainly as procedural formalities rather than as opportunities for

co-creation. In contrast, informal civic initiatives demonstrated greater adaptability, combining protests, campaigns and institutional dialogue to influence outcomes. Despite limited formal influence, such initiatives have been instrumental in promoting transparency and advocating for more sustainable urban development.

The second phase offered insights into how citizens perceive, interpret and relate to their everyday environments. Within the scope of this study, participatory mapping proved useful in revealing how participants relate to urban space, while also exposing the constraints that limit its wider application in civic engagement. While participants were capable of generating observations rooted in lived experience, their ability to translate these into planning discourse was constrained by the lack of accessible and user-friendly participatory tools. The findings point to the importance of developing participatory mechanisms that help citizens move from individual observations to actionable input, bridging personal experience with formal planning discourse.

Finally, the growing use of digital platforms and tools developed by informal civic groups presents an underexplored opportunity to strengthen spatial literacy and civic education. By enabling residents to document, visualise, and share their lived experiences, such instruments can foster collective awareness and more substantive dialogue between citizens and institutions. However, the responsibility for ensuring that participation becomes meaningful lies primarily with planning authorities. Without systemic changes that enhance transparency, responsiveness, and institutional openness, public participation will remain largely reactive—activated only in moments of contention—rather than evolving into a proactive and continuous element of urban governance.

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