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Resident (Non)Participation in Croatian Housing Estates

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Abstract

This paper explores public participation in socialist and post-socialist housing estates in Croatian cities. The quantitative (survey, N = 1,536) and qualitative research methods (focus groups with residents, semi-structured interviews with experts) were conducted. The focus was on the level of participation and obstacles for participation in Croatian housing estates. The results con- firm the hypothesis that those citizens who do not believe that their partic- ipation impacts the decision-making process are less likely to participate. At the level of all estates, citizens are poorly acquainted with the actions of the city and local authorities, and poorly involved in decision-making processes. Citizens are mainly engaged when urgent situations occur that endanger the quality of life in the estate, which is most often related to environmental or infrastructural issues. That is also the most important ad hoc channel by which residents communicate their requirements with the formal govern- ment in cities, which is also called reactionist activism.

Keywords

public participation, socialist and post-socialist housing estates, major Croatian cities, (non)participation

Introduction

Public participation has different repercussions on the quality of life in estates, from infrastructure and environmental issues to the maintenance of buildings in older estates, which is proving to be one of the biggest challenges of housing today, even at the European level. Public participation can be defined as the residents' involvement in decision-making processes that can have an impact on the neighborhood (Dekker and van Kempen 2008). Pharr and Putnam (2000) evaluated the state of democracy in the Western developed countries and found that after removing obstacles to liberal democracy and market economy, support for democracy is unquestioned, but there is a growing "public unhappiness with government and institutions of representative democracy" (Pharr and Putman 2000, 6). Citizen participation, which is considered as one of the human and social features of neighborhoods that affect residential satisfaction, the quality of housing and the quality of life in these neighborhoods (Bonaiuto and Fornara 2017), is also a source of opportunities for preserving the socio-cultural and economic values of the estates in the future (Sadıkoğlu and Özsoy 2020). Various studies (e.g. Cooper and Rodman 1994) therefore emphasize that participation, that is, social organizations, is a key element of the quality of housing and call it control over housing. As one of the essential dimensions of community stability and an important part of overall satisfaction with the community and estate, a large number of authors investigate public participation, especially in post-socialist countries where its influence and role are weaker (Bryson et al. 2013; Filipovič Hrast and Dekker 2009; Marzuki 2015; Rolnik 2014).

Our research interest lies in the investigation of the level of participation in Croatian housing estates, with a focus on the information among citizens and their evaluation of the work of city bodies and local self-government bodies, initiatives of citizens and civil society organizations, as well as their personal involvement in the neighborhood. Each of these dimensions corresponds with our key research questions: What is the level of participation in Croatian housing estates? What are the obstacles for participation? By examining how informed the citizens are, and who they define as key actors, we can gain perspective on their level of knowledge and information, which may or may not stimulate their further action. By investigating their involvement in the participation process and identifying their activities and obstacles, we get a clearer insight and an answer to the question why participation is low and what activities the residents are able (and willing) to undertake to enhance the quality of life in their neighborhood.

The decline of participation is a significant problem in developed countries, and in this light we would like to emphasize that it is (not) developing in post-socialist countries. Croatia is an important example of a post-socialist country with a low level of participation. Whilst some other post-socialist countries, as we will mention later, have developed more strongly in the direction of participation, Croatia is still struggling, and can therefore indi- cate to the reader all the difficulties that post-socialist countries can have getting out of the transition process, and possibly help them overcome these obstacles. Croatia is among the countries where, together with the lacking legal framework (housing strategy), there is also a lack of support for the citizens' participation, but also a lack of interest among citizens to participate in policies concerning the quality of housing. This is in accor- dance with research in other Central and Eastern European countries where the so-called third wave of democracy or the new democratic devel- opment has not yet led to the participation characteristic of Western countries (Filipovič Hrast and Dekker 2009). Citizens do not participate in public policy making because there are no institutional mechanisms that provide them with significant power or influence (Zlatar Gamberožić 2019; Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar 2015; Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021).

The scientific contribution of this paper lies in the presentation of some of the reasons for low level of participation in Croatia, which we will show through the results of survey research, as well as focus groups.

The paper discusses specific aspects of public participation in three key areas: (1) the level of information among citizens, (2) the evaluation of city/local activities, and (3) citizens' involvement in the neighborhood.

High and Low Level of Participation: Approaches and Causes

There are a number of factors that theorists bring in connection with the exis- tence or non-existence of participation. In this sense, we can single out two approaches: individual and social. The first approach mainly considers the personal level of the individual and the factors that influence the existence or non-existence of participation at that level. In this sense, it mainly focuses on resources such as income and education. A high level of education encourages participation in the community, and a person is more likely to become active in political and participatory activities (Staeheli and Clarke 2003; Verba and Nie 1972). Aside from that, demographic characteristics such as age and gender have an important influence because they form the basis for explaining participation (Campbell and Lee 1992; Fischer 1982; Guest and Wierzbicki 1999). Ethnicity is also associated with patterns of engagement and participation—for example, ethnic minorities and majorities participate in different kinds of volunteer activities, with the former participating more in activities relating to their own ethnic community and to other minorities (Jensen 2008; Stepick, Stepick, and Labissiere 2008). Ethnicity has proven to be an important individual factor in Western countries, but still not in post-socialist countries such as Croatia.1

The other (social) approach to explaining the (non)participation of resi- dents in the neighborhood is focused on the social context of the neighborhood and its influences, and the ways in which individuals within the neighborhood are interconnected (Marschall 2001). For example, if people easily identify with others in the neighborhood, it is more likely that they will also want to participate in that group, that is, their participation will be higher. Living in an area longer, intending to stay longer, and having more children can be seen as embedding an individual within a community, increasing both the opportunities and incentives to participate. There are important benefits of co-production and community empowerment: empowered communities can engage and participate in local projects, have strong social ties and a sense of belonging; in time, they can also develop community skills that build capacity to act and contribute to democracy on the local level (Steiner, McMillan, and Hill O'Connor 2023).

The social level also refers to the level of democracy that is present (or not) in a certain society. The level of democracy is an important factor in all urban transformations, so various authors (Arthurson 2003; Muers 2004) note that the population living in a certain city area should have the most active role in its preservation. Speaking about democracy, it should be noted that the equal role and degree of activity of all types of actors: economic, political, professional, and citizens—inhabitants (Bassand 2001) is essential for the process of democracy and democracy itself.

People living in established and stable democracies will tend to be more active in forming and joining voluntary organizations of various types and participating in various issues. The reason for their interest may be that they had more experience with the principles and practices of democratic action (Lipset 1994). For example, the Danish public participation approach values its public's rights by applying both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods such as public exhibition,

workshops and census survey (submitting proposals, ideas, comments and/or objections), while in the UK non-government organizations, private companies, and the local council ini- tiates the public participation program (Marzuki 2015). In the examples of these countries, we see both the top-down and bottom-up approaches to participation, combined and designed with the purpose of increasing participation. However, Hannemann (2006, 246) warns that "many critical studies have shown that in the neo-liberal system state assistance programs tend to destroy rather than build up local civic networks because of their principally topdown structure." The top-down approach mainly has a negative effect on participatory processes and reduces the level of participation of residents in spatial planning, so it is crucial to add a bottom-up approach, that is, local initiatives of residents.

In post-socialist countries, with a still underdeveloped level of democracy, that is often not the case. Actors with more power—economic and political actors—are often the only decision-makers and implementers, while professionals and civilians are in a much weaker position, which is also transferred to issues of planning and spatial management. Research (Dekker and Van Kempen 2008) shows that countries with a socialist past are less inclined to participatory activities because they do not have significant power or influence in the estates, and the question arises whether this situation would change if these countries paid more attention to the issue of strengthening relations in the neighborhood and communities. The question is also how many years it will take to eradicate the effect of the old system and how long it will take Central European countries to adopt the norms of participation. It is considered that non-profit institutions (NGOs and civil initiatives) in these countries should participate in the creation of new strategies that would also include interventions by the public, that is, citizens.

Approaches that are commonly used to study tenant participation include Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation, Ward's levels of tenant participation (1992), the concept of civil society (Suszyńska and Rataj 2017), or Clegg's concept of "circuits of power" (Cairncross, Clapham, and Goodlad 1994). These approaches depict different levels of tenant involvement and formal structures of participation. They also show the division of power between key actors (e.g. tenants and landlords). Ward's levels of tenant participation is somewhat complementary to Arnstein's ladder of citizen partic- ipation, but as it focuses on the landlord–tenant relationship, it is not applicable for our research because in Croatia real estate ownership is the dominant type of housing tenure (in 2023, 91.2% of citizens lived in privately owned apartments (Eurostat 2024), which is also typical for other post-socialist countries (e.g. Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria). That is why in this paper we start from Arnstein's typology of citizen participation (1969), which precisely explains the (non)participation of citizens and its degrees, and is therefore applicable for the Croatian context. The typology is based on a metaphorical "ladder," "with each ascending rung representing increasing levels of citizen agency, control, and power. In addition to the eight "rungs" of participation, Arnstein includes a descriptive continuum of participatory power that moves from nonparticipation (no power) to degrees of tokenism (counterfeit power) to degrees of citizen participation (actual power)" (Arnstein 1969). The bottom rungs of the ladder are (1) Manipulation and (2) Therapy. These two rungs describe levels of "nonparticipation." They explain processes in which powerholders try to "educate" or "cure" the participants. Rungs 3 and 4 progress to levels of "tokenism" that allow citizens to hear and to have a voice: (3) Informing and (4) Consultation. Citizens may in this case indeed hear and be heard, but they still lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by the powerful. When partic- ipation is restricted to these levels, there is no follow-through, that is, no assurance of changing the status quo. Rung (5) Placation is simply a higher level tokenism because the ground rules allow citizens to advise, but retain for the powerholders the right to decide. Further up the ladder are levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making clout. Citizens can enter into a (6) Partnership—it enables them to negotiate and engage in agreements with traditional power holders.

At the topmost rungs: (7) Delegated Power and (8) Citizen Control, citizens obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power.

According to Arnstein (1969, 217), at the lower levels of participation only Consultations enable citizens to get and give certain advice (thus, intervene in the plan). While at the level of "Citizen Power" (Partnership, Delegated Power and Citizen Control), power is redistributed through negotiations between citizens and actors in positions of power (stakeholders). The highest level of participation—Citizen Control—means that the citizens themselves have the right to initiate urban projects and design their own living space without intermedi- aries between them and the means of financing. The ladder of participation, therefore, also describes the control over the planning process as participatory planning, which includes systematic efforts for a better quality of life in the community in the future, designed according to the vision of the residents, as well as the authorities and stakeholders involved in the process.

To sum up, the factors influencing public participation can be categorized into individual and social approaches. The individual approach considers personal factors such as income, education, age, gender, and ethnicity. The social approach examines the neighborhood context, social ties, and levels of democracy. The latter, especially the level of democracy, can better explain differences in non-participation between established democracies and post- socialist countries. For the context of Croatia, which we will further elaborate in the next passage, we chose Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation to explain varying degrees of citizen control and involvement in decision- making processes.

Public Participation in Post-Socialist Countries and Croatia

In spite of all the problems that we witness in strategic spatial planning in post-socialist European countries, in some of these countries a lot of effort is being made to develop the participatory processes. For example, "the stra- tegic planning processes in the six cities—Riga, St. Petersburg, Vilnius, Sofia, Budapest and Prague have resulted in a shared vision for the future of the city as well as a framework for more effective policy and investment planning" (Tsenkova 2007, 467). Based on the creation of strategic partnerships between the central government, businesses and NGOs, goal-focused development priorities link economic, social, spatial, and financial objectives, making the strategic priorities explicit. The post-socialist countries are still lagging behind their West European counterparts and struggle with the absence of the city development strategy, commercialization, overbuilding, gentrification, illegal building, shrinkage of public space, disregard for their citizens' true needs (Zlatar Gamberožić 2019). Although the situation in nearby Slovenia is somewhat better than in Croatia, there is also dissatisfaction with the participatory process: "Public participation is also vital for the sustainable development of cities. Central European countries in general have been more oriented toward economical and urban development than toward reinforcing the participation of citizens. The empowerment and participation of various actors have not yet been sufficiently recognized as official policy goals in Slovenia" (FilipovičHrast and Dekker 2009, 152).

Also in Serbia, which was like Croatia and Slovenia a part of the former socialist state of Yugoslavia, public participation in the urban planning process is generally low: "Traditional ways of involving public in planning process are public presentations of strategic documents and urban and regional plans usually in final phases of their production. And the public response is very scarce and sporadic" (Đukanović, Živković, and Lalović 2004, 374). Researchers state that until recently, there has not been sufficient determination within politics to implement enhanced democratic, legal, and institutional arrangements and instruments allowing for greater transparency and meaningful involvement of

concerned citizens and organizations. They have also been concerned with the fact that the notion of public interest has almost been lost in Serbia (Maričić, Cvetinović, and Bolay 2018). Decisions on planning, as well as conceptual solutions, are made without major research and analyses and behind closed doors (Institute for Urban Policies/Ministry of Space 2022).2

In Croatia, from the nineties of the last century onward, as in other post- socialist countries, the focus shifted from the previous dominance of the state to the privatization of space (and real estate), which gave the decision- making power over space to the market, i.e. economic actors (Hodžić 2005; Seferagić 2007; Svirčić Gotovac and Kerbler 2019; Zlatar Gamberožić 2019). Some authors describe these social changes as if the "tyranny of the state" has been replaced by "the tyranny of the market" (Häussermann and Kapphan 2004), which results in the commercialization of space as well as the reduction or "end" of spatial planning, and in favor of private interests and the interests of capital.

The social and economic circumstances in Croatia, along with the belief in the presence and prevalence of corruption, undermine trust in public institutions and the normative framework of society, consequently discouraging citizens from participation (Gvozdanović et al. 2024; Karajić 2024). Recent data point to the problem of trust in the executive power at both local and state levels in Croatia, highlighting its low level and simultaneously greater trust of citizens in hierarchical institutions (Gvozdanović et al. 2024; Karajić 2024; Nikodem and Črpić 2014). Over 80 percent of citizens in Croatia believe they have no influence on decision-making regarding their local community, while on the other hand, they emphasize their strongest connection to the neighborhood or city where they live (Karajić 2024).

As some research states, the level of participation in Croatian cities is low according to Arnstein's ladder of participation (Bežovan and Zrinščak 2008; Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar Gamberožić 2020; Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021; Zlatar 2015). Social groups with little economic power (mostly citizens), have little or no choice in making decisions.

We can conclude that a large number of residents do not participate in decisions about their neighbourhoods and the local community activity is rather unnoticeable […] according to the ladder of citizen participation, these are only bottom rungs of the ladder—non-participation (manipulation) or just informing the cit- izens (one-way communication). (Zlatar 2015, 109)

Although citizens have the right to make comments and suggestions in spatial plans, they do not have to be accepted by the authorities. This is a top-down model of participation in which spatial changes are decided by the government and only minor issues raised by residents are considered (e.g. a private plot of land within the planning zone). The public has very little influence on changes in spatial plans (Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021, 77).

Therefore, a key factor for our research questions could be that residents perceive their participation as inconsequential. This perception could then explain their future reluctance to participate in decision-making processes. At the lowest levels of Arnstein's scale of participation, there are manipula- tion and therapy, which are in fact non-participation—and this confirms the thesis that, since their actions have no consequences, the residents stop participating in actions.

In Croatia, the system of institutional influence of citizens on changes in their city districts is formally ensured through the existence of councils of local committees and their program activities. Each city district, depending on its size, has more or less local committees that deal with communal issues and meet the needs of citizens in the fields of health and social welfare, culture and sports, environmental actions, care for children and the environment, gardens, etc. Communication with the members of the council of local com- mittees takes place through proposals or warnings from citizens about certain

irregularities, regarding the state of communal (dis)order, damage to commu- nal facilities and devices of the communal infrastructure, as well as the initi- ation of initiatives. The councils of local committees should, in addition, establish cooperation with associations, the business sector and institutions in the area of the local committee, organize joint gatherings of citizens on individual issues and encourage citizens to get involved in the implementation of work programs. Although research on the functioning of local committees is rare (Manojlović Toman, Vukojičić Tomić, and Koprić 2019), the media indicate that the members of the local committees (as an advisory body) in many cases state that the members of the city district councils ignore them, propose other investments, and ignore their suggestions that they received from the citizens (Ivković 2020). For this reason, some authors call the local committees a "democratic facade without resources and role" (Manojlović Toman, Vukojičić Tomić, and Koprić 2019, 188). One of the few studies on this topic shows that only 10% of cities in Croatia publish information about the work of local committees on their websites, while 82.3% of cities share no information about the activities of local committees on their websites (Manojlović Toman, Vukojičić Tomić, and Koprić 2019). It often happens that the members of the local committees only vote on decisions that exclusively correspond to the city districts, considering that this is a higher level of power, connected to the city's (political) interests.

Meetings of local committees are in most cases very rare, they rarely or never encourage citizens to participate in them, and they also rarely organize citizens' assemblies. This also supports the thesis that institutional mecha- nisms are not effective and do not provide citizens with significant power or influence. One of the reasons is that they do not have financial resources (Hrženjak 2011). They de facto depend on the decisions of the city government, which they give legitimacy to by their existence. Some members of local committees believe that they should be abolished, and some that their powers should be strengthened (Ivković 2020). The root cause of everything is that citizens' voices are not regarded, which contributes to their demotivation to cooperate and make proposals. On the other hand, due to the lack of interest and inactivity of citizens, members of local committees justify their poor efficiency, similar to the case in Slovenia, and policy-makers are not obliged to respect citizens' opinions and take them into account when making decisions (Filipovič Hrast and Dekker 2009). In this case, the role of citizens' representatives is often assumed by civil society organizations, organizing "bottom-up" initiatives and actions in order to achieve citizen par- ticipation in the neighborhood (Filipovič Hrast and Dekker 2009).

In sum, we can point out that the residents have very little effect on urban transformation of Croatian cities and neighborhoods. It has even been claimed that the weak position of residents puts up a smokescreen to hide other stakeholders' interests, for example building companies' profit interests and political moves (Gustavsson and Elander 2016). This also supports the thesis of greater influence of one and lesser influence and power of other types of actors, as well as certain manipulation of civil actors.

CEE countries, including Croatia, are adopting the norms and new identities of active citizens who seek to influence housing-related processes directly through protests or indirectly through civil society channels (Guasti 2016). Supporting this idea is the fact that the new city administration of the capital of Croatia (Zagreb) proposed a pilot project for Participatory Budgeting in the four city districts in 2024, based on citizens' proposal of new projects (Make a suggestion for a better neighborhood!) (City of Zagreb 2025).

Methodology

This paper is based on a research of housing estates of the socialist (built 1945–1990) and post-socialist period (built after 1990), and was conducted in four major Croatian cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek). The socialist period is characterized by are large housing estates, which can be found all over Europe. Depending on the local context, they are areas often contain- ing more than 1,000 dwellings in high-rise buildings, which were built between the 1950s and the 1980s as coherent and compact planning units (Wassenberg 2018). Large housing estates from the socialist period in Croatia (then Yugoslavia) were built to address post-World War II problems related to industrialization and the mass employment of the working and middle classes in large cities (Sendi and Kerbler 2021; Svirčić Gotovac, Đokić, and Adamović 2023). The construction of such estates was massive, aimed at quickly resolving housing issues, and the criteria for construction relied on cheaper (prefabricated) architectural and building solutions. The lack of concern for the maintenance and renovation of this housing stock already existed in the socialist (Rogić 1997) and continued in the post-socialist era. In a social sense, the large housing estates from that period were planned to meet all the residents' needs, from public services to green spaces and recreational areas. Despite their old age and problems with main- tenance, they are not characterized by social problems or economic poverty (or segregation) of the residents, who express satisfaction with their living conditions and show no significant intention to move out.

New housing locations, built during the transitional period, are most often integrated into existing estates and neighborhoods. While the socialist-era estates were built by the state, new estates are usually constructed by private construction firms, which, driven by profit, utilize every opportunity for development (from demolishing old houses and repurposing building plots for the construction of multi-family buildings on smaller lots to building large residential blocks on the outskirts of the city). The new estates rely on the existing infrastructure of the old estates (transportation, social, and public services), and in ecological terms, they lack green and public spaces, which all deteriorates the quality of life for their residents.

The study of Croatian cities contributes to greater insight into the state of the participatory process in post-socialist countries with an underdevel- oped democracy. We aim to contribute to the existing body of public par- ticipation research by investigating citizens' interests, desires, and needs for participation, as well as identifying the challenges they face in their par- ticipation efforts.

In this research, the focus is on the aspect of participation that concerns the level of information and knowledge among residents and their evaluation of the work of city bodies and local self-government bodies, initiatives of residents/citizens and civil society organizations, as well as their personal involvement in activities aimed at improving the neighborhood/estate. The starting point are two research questions: What is the level of participation in Croatian housing estates? What are the obstacles for participation?

The theoretical hypothesis is that citizens who do not believe that their par- ticipation could impact the decision-making process are far less likely to participate, and vice versa. To further elaborate, our hypothesis is that citizens either do not participate or exhibit low levels of participation because they perceive their opinions as having no impact. Specifically, their ideas and wishes do not reach the highest levels of decision-making, and they do not observe any changes resulting from their contributions.

The research was conducted combining qualitative and quantitative meth- odology. A survey research was conducted in mid-2022 on a sample of respondents (N = 1,536) aged 18 and over in the capital Zagreb and macro- regional centers Split, Rijeka and Osijek in selected housing estates built in the

socialist period (1945–1990) and the post-socialist period (after 1990). The housing estates were selected purposefully. The selection was influenced by various factors, including the construction period (socialist and post-socialist), size, and geographical location within the city. Moreover, the selection aimed to include estates from distinct timeframes, showcasing diverse urban and architectural characteristics of different decades. In the chosen estates, multistage probability sampling was implemented at the stages of: (a) multi-family building entrance (i.e. street address), (b) household within the building, and (c) respondent in the household; using the random walk method and last birthday method. The survey was administered face-to-face, in a computer-assisted form (CAPI method). The comparison of the socialist and post-socialist estates has been one of the focuses of the wider project, but in the case of citizens' participation, no large or concrete differences were shown between these types of estates. For this reason, we decided to test and show the results according to the four large cities,3 regardless of the estate type in which the residents reside. Taking into account the size of the city, our sample consisted of 43.0% of respondents from Zagreb, 24.2% from Split, 16.5% from Rijeka, and 16.3% from Osijek. In total, we surveyed residents from 39 socialist and post-socialist estates, with 62.6% of residents from the socialist estates, and 37.4% from the estates built in the post-socialist period. In the sample, there were 41.3% men and 58.7% women. The average age of the respondents was 44 years.

For the purpose of this paper, different aspects of individual and commu- nity participation were measured with several questions: (1) Perception of personal influence on the decisions made in connection with the estate (on a scale from 1–5) 4; (2) Perception of the activity in the local comunity (on a scale from 1–5) 5; (3) Identification of the main actors in local policies6 (measures local political knowledge); (4) Activity of residents in organizations/initiatives aimed at improving the neighborhood/estate7; (5) Participation and activities of residents in the local community (open-end question)8 (4 and 5 measure individual participation of participants). We checked for differences between the cities on the main variables with the chi-square and t-test.

The data collected in this part of the research is presented in percentages, that is, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted in order to get better insights into the proportions of inhabitants that participate in their estates, and to answer the first research question about the level of participation in the housing estates. Additionally, to test our hypothesis we compared the per- ception of personal influence on decisions made in the estate and the percep- tion of activity in the local community between residents who were active (participated) in the last five years vs. the ones who were not.

This data was also the basis for conducting the second, qualitative data analysis. In addition to quantitative research, five focus groups were conducted in Zagreb and Rijeka from June to September 2022 (one in Rijeka and four in Zagreb), in order to gain deeper insights into specific problems related to individual estates in those two cities. 12 men and 24 women who were residents of the estates listed in Table 1 participated in the focus groups. Participants who participated in the focus groups were also respondents in the quantitative part of the research.

Table 1. Sample of estates (focus groups)

Cities	Residents	Estates
Zagreb: Knežija, Savica, Travno, Sopot, Trnsko, Vrbani II, Dugave, Vrbik, Sopnica-Jelkovec, Vrbani III, Selska-Baštijanova, Jaruščica, Vukovarska-Radnička, Ravnice, Špansko-Oranice	31	15
Rijeka: Drenova (Gornja and Donja), Belvedere, Podmurvica, Kozala	5	4
Total	36	19

We asked all respondents who filled out the survey to leave their contacts if they want to participate in the focus groups. Although this seemed as a simple recruitment method, after further contacting the participants, it turned out that they were no longer interested in participating, especially in Osijek and Split, where focus groups have not yet been conducted. The turnout was better in Zagreb and Rijeka. The size of the focus groups was 6–8 participants and, in average, the focus groups lasted 90 minutes. The questions in the protocol were semi-structured. The audio mate- rial from the focus groups was transcribed and analyzed.

Through the conversation with the residents we expected to obtain deeper insights into what strategies citizens use to participate in the estate and which social context most often leads to their engagement. We were also interested in how citizens evaluate the work of formal bodies with which they should cooperate, and in which context civil society organizations (NGOs) are most often activated.

In addition to focus groups with residents in the mentioned cities, we also conducted semi-structured interviews on similar topics with experts: archi- tects, sociologists and urban planners, experts from Zagreb County Bureau for Physical Planning, Ministry of Construction and Physical Planning, Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund, and Urban Planning Institute of Croatia. We also interviewed the Head of the Urban Planning Department of the City of Rijeka, Head of the Department for Spatial Planning of the City of Zagreb, the President of Zagreb's Society of Architects. A total of 28 experts participated in the interviews (Zagreb—13, Split—4, Rijeka—6, and Osijek—5).

The data collected in the qualitative research was analyzed using the principles of thematic analysis (Kiger and Varpio 2020; Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013). The thematic analysis was conducted deductively, based on theoretical knowledge about citizen participation. After that, initial codes were generated and grouped into themes. Themes were revised and named in accordance with a critical approach derived from theoretical data (Kiger and Varpio 2020).

Both research methods—focus groups and the survey had the same research objective, so that the focus groups were designed as a certain supplement to the survey questionnaire. Thus, entering into conversation with residents led us to finding out more about their concrete problems and moti- vations regarding engagement and participation in their neighborhood, which helped us to understand the issue of their (non)participation more clearly.

Results and Discussion

Level of Participation and Obstacles to Participation in Croatian Housing Estates

When asked about the possibility of personal influence on decisions made in connection with the construction of estates and infrastructural changes in the estates, most participants from Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek believe that they have no personal influence on the decision-making concerning their estate (Table 2). More residents of Split than those of other cities think that they can influence decision-making. Table 2 shows also that a large number of respondents, especially in Split and Rijeka, are not sure about the possibility of influencing decisions about space, which is also significant information.

This result corresponds to research that indicates the low influence of civil actors on political decisions. Accordingly, Dekker and van Kempen (2008, 127) believe that residents are most often excluded from negotiations on the future of the estates and that private interests play a leading role in that process. They emphasize that there are often hidden interests and processes in policies that exclude residents from the decision-making process, which we can certainly connect with the previously mentioned typology of actors, i.e., power relations between different types of actors, where less power is attributed to residents. Their exclusion from negotiations and lack of influence therefore leads to non-participation, as mentioned before.

Table 2. Personal influence on decisions made regarding the estate (construction, infrastructural changes), N=1536 (%)

Personal influence on decisions	Zagreb	Split	Rijeka	Osijek
Completely disagree	37.1	22.1	19.4	23.5
Disagree	36.2	27.0	35.6	34.7
Neither agree nor disagree	15.9	27.8	30.4	23.9
Agree	7.9	21.8	13.8	12.7
Completely agree	3.0	1.3	0.8	5.2
Total	100	100	100	100

p = .000, χ2 = 111,473, df=12

Table 3. Respondents' assessment of the activity in the local community, N=1536 (%)

The local community (town district, local board, citizen/resident initiatives, etc.) in my estate is active	Zagreb	Split	Rijeka	Osijek
Completely disagree	10.6	10.5	12.3	4.4
Disagree	25.3	15.1	28.1	16.3
Neither agree nor disagree	36.2	43.7	32.8	37.8
Agree	20.4	28.6	26.9	35.5
Completely agree	7.6	2.2	0	6.0
Total	100	100	100	100

p = .000, χ2 = 81,143, df=12

Table 4. Main actors in local policies or activities in Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek, N=1536 (%)

Main actors	Cities			
	Zagreb	Split	Rijeka	Osijek
City authorities	19.5	20.2	33.2	37.1
City district/local committee[i]	37.1	34.8	22.5	33,5
Civil organizations/NGO	1.2	0.5	0.4	0
Initiatives of residents/citizens	4.5	4.9	21.3	8.8
Someone else, who?	0.5	0.5	0.4	0
I don't know	37.2	39.1	22.1	20.7
Total	100	100	100	100

p = .000, χ2 = 149,483, df=15

In response to the question whether the local community (city district, local committee, various initiatives of citizens and residents, etc.) is active in their estate (Table 3), the majority of respondents in all cities, gave a vague answer to this question, "neither agree nor disagree."

That can be interpreted in two ways: as a kind of average evaluation of the activity, but perhaps also a lack of interest in the activities of the local community. Furthermore, almost equally in all cities, about one-third of the respondents estimated that the local community in their estate is active.

When the residents' responses are analyzed to see which actors they recognize as the main actors of local policies or activities that take place in their estate (Table 4), it can be noticed that residents in all cities are most familiar with the activities of the city district and local committees, as the lowest levels at which local government operates, and where citizens' opinions and proposals should be respected.

A very high percentage of respondents in Rijeka and Osijek mostly recognize the city and not local authorities, which make "top-down" decisions and which do not actually communicate with citizens about problems of purely local importance. This data can be explained by the fact that we are talking about smaller cities where the city authorities are more visible to the citizens (especially the personification of the authorities in the person of the mayor) than the incumbents of the government structure at lower, local levels. The highest ranking city authorities can therefore be seen as responsible for "all good" and "all bad" city policies, especially if they cooperate poorly with the local government, whose scope of decision-making is limited. Such results are consistent with those indicating that the city assembly and city administration neglect the local self-government (Hrženjak 2011).

A very common answer to this question is also "I don't know," that is, the impossibility of identifying the main actors of local policies or activities (in Zagreb almost 40%), which again points to respondents' lack of interest in recognizing the main places of power in cities. The disinterest of citizens is also explained by the results of focus groups that people "have no faith in the system" because they think that their proposals will not be taken into account when solving a problem, although one of the residents thinks that citizens can still act through local committees and make decisions related to their estates.

I think that a lot can be done through local committees, only that people have to come to meetings, but they don't like it because they don't have faith in the system. (Resident, Zagreb, Trnsko, old estate)

Distrust in the system is also extremely important to explain why residents are rarely active and do not participate in resident meetings or in local initia- tives, considering the already mentioned imbalance in power relations between different types of actors. A low level of participation may also indicate weak social cohesion of residents, except in the case of ad hoc, reactionist initiatives to specific problems and situations, since participation in policy- making processes has an impact on the social cohesion of residents (Dekker and van Kempen 2008).

In the focus group in Zagreb, some residents noticed a lack of care for space by the city authorities and the allowing of construction that favors the interests of private investors, which can explain the citizens' discouragement to follow city policies. One of the interlocutors emphasizes the significance of expert opinions on certain issues in the city and the importance of connecting experts and citizens in public discussions, in which the govern- ment should play a crucial role.

The responsible government should engage experts, but also monitor the inter- ests of citizens. There are public debates and ways for citizens to participate and to take into account what really corresponds to the opinion of experts. (Resident, Zagreb, Jaruščica, new estate)

Also, residents consider councils of local committees to be important in a "preventive" sense, so that some problems do not arise, which must then nec- essarily be solved through petitions or by organizing various initiatives. There are also some criticisms of local committees, i.e. negative opinions about their work. Most often, it is about expectations from local committees that they should recognize crucial problems themselves and propose their solutions in order to prevent the escalation of residents' dissatisfaction.

What I expect from the city government and my local community is that they know what they need to do and that it's for the sake of my well-being. The moment I have to sign a petition because of their bad work, we are already in trouble. (Resident, Zagreb, Knežija, old estate)

The activities of the city district and councils of local committees are more recognizable than the activities of the city government in Zagreb, Split and Osijek (which are the largest Croatian cities) because they operate on a lower instance, related to communal problems, which the residents should have more influence on, than on the problems regarding higher levels of governance.

Some Examples of Successful Activities of Residents in the Local Community

Furthermore, we investigated to what extent the residents themselves were active in an association or initiative aimed at improving the neighborhood or estate in the last five years (Table 5). In the total sample, there are almost 95% of inactive residents. The percentages of inactive residents are in all cities close to 100% inactivity, especially in Osijek and Split. The percentage of the most active residents in Zagreb is under ten percent, and in other cities it is about or under five percent. This result is in accordance with the (in) activity of citizens in some cities of Slovenia and the Netherlands (Filipovič Hrast and Dekker 2009).

We conducted additional analyses which showed that residents who partic- ipated in activities aimed at improving the neighborhood in the past five years had a slightly greater (although still small) sense that they could personally influence decisions related to the neighborhood compared to residents who did not participate [M(active) = 2.78; M(inactive) = 2.25; t-test = 3.433, p < .01]. We also conducted a t-test to determine whether they felt their local community was active. The results showed that residents who participated in activities aimed at improving the neighborhood in the past five years had a greater sense that their local community was active [M(active) = 3.36; M(inactive) = 2.92; t-test = 3.175, p < .01] compared to residents who did not participate in any activities. Although there is a small share of active residents, these results support the hypothesis that if a resident believes they have an influence on events in the neighborhood (or believe to live in an active community), they will be more inclined to participate, and vice versa.

Table 5. The respondent's activity in the last 5 years in an organization/initiative that aimed to improve the neighborhood/estate (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek), N=1536 (%)

Activity in an organization or initiative	Cities			
	Zagreb	Split	Rijeka	Osijek
Active	8.5	2.2	5.5	2.0
Inactive	90.6	96.8	93.7	97.6
No answer	0.9	1.1	0.8	0.4
Total	100	100	100	100

p = .000, χ2 = 26,490, df=6

Almond and Verba believe that civil culture is "a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, perceptions and the like that support participation" (1963, 178). This includes the attitude toward neighbors and activities that contribute to the well-being of all residents. However, what citizens emphasize in focus groups is also the short duration of local actions and their non-existent conti- nuity, which can sometimes result in the absence of results of these actions on long-term planning and space, which can also be the reason for weak personal activity of residents through civic initiatives and associations.

In general, our protests are a onetime thing, people gather for one day and that's it, and after that absolutely nothing happens. There should be continuity and pressure. (Resident, Zagreb, Savica, old estate)

Furthermore, Table 6 shows the results of the open-end question that explains in more detail the interests and engagement of those residents who consider themselves active in the estate.

Table 6. Participation and activities of residents in the local community according to open answers (n, %)

Participation/activity	n	%
Landscaping/public areas (construction of children's parks/playgrounds, greening)	24	27.6
Development of the neighborhood (construction of a kindergarten/school, sidewalks, traffic regulation, parking)	14	16.1
Local committee, city district	12	13.8

Other activities (sports, humanitarian, work with children and youth, social actions, culture, work in associations)	12	13.8
Improvement of the building	6	6.9
Local elections (political engagement)	3	3.4
No answer/unspecified	16	18.4
Total	87	100

Almost a third of the active respondents stated that they are most often engaged in landscaping and public areas. Almond and Verba (1963) believe that engagement with public areas and landscaping are one of the most frequent participatory activities that contribute to the quality of life and housing of all res- idents, and strengthen civic culture. According to the open answers, the second most common activity was the improvement of the neighborhood and the construction of infrastructure, the construction of new public institutions, and the regulation of traffic and parking. Engagement in the local committee and city district and participation in various activities in the estate (sports, humanitarian activities, work with children and youth, etc.) are represented with a similar fre- quency. Not all citizen activities are action-oriented and aimed at changing con- ditions in neighborhoods, but it is evident that when they engage in activism, they are mostly focused on spatial and environmental issues.

Role of Residents and Civil Society Organizations in Reactionist Activism

Some citizen initiatives were successful due to their collaboration with non- governmental organizations, which, among other things, ensured clearer artic- ulation of citizens' interests and attracted media attention. This is in line with the results of previous research that indicate an increase in the power and influence of civil society organizations in Croatia, especially in the city of Zagreb and Rijeka. The NGO sector serves as a link between political power and the public, and encourages the public to express their interests (Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021).

The only protests here that were more massive were those where the media pointed to it. (Resident, Zagreb, Savica, old estate)

According to the results of focus groups, in Zagreb and other cities, reac- tionist activism9 is noticeable, which is one of the effective ways of involving the public in matters of shaping space (Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021). Very often, the spatial changes that citizen initiatives did not accept were fundamentally tied to the preservation of public interest because the land was owned by the city or the state and their purpose was of a public nature. Changing the purpose of such areas would jeopardize the well-being of all the residents of the community. This type of civic engagement often comes after the inability to communicate with the author- ities and is actually a reaction to decisions or plans made by the authorities. It is focused both on the personal interests of citizens for a better quality of life and on the public interest.

In Zagreb, in comparison to other cities, the existence and activation of various initiatives is noticed in concrete situations as a reaction to certain interventions in the space. For example, the planned

construction of a church and a pastoral center in Zagreb, which was stopped by the residents with the initiative "We are Keeping our Park" ("Čuvamo naš park"). In addition, the church and the pastoral center were supposed to be built in the park without a valid location permit. The initiative lasted for a month until the authorities gave up on the specific project. This case has received a great deal of media and professional coverage, and represents an important example of the importance of citizen reaction and desire for citizen participa- tion in the case of undesirable City plans (Svirčić Gotovac and Zlatar Gamberožić 2020).

Considering the amount of population, the only park that remains in our neigh- borhood is somehow of interest to everyone. The survey conducted by the ini- tiative showed that 85% of the population of that local committee that gravitates to the park is against the construction of the church. (Resident, Zagreb, Savica, old estate)

The initiatives of residents are in our sample considerably more recogniz- able than the initiatives of civil society organizations, although civil society organizations are praised by citizens regarding their involvement in solving problems.

In Osijek there is now a very active group of citizens on Facebook who know how to react to the wrong decisions of both the city and the company that arranges, essentially, green spaces […] They send letters and request meetings with the city administration. (Architect, Osijek)

Civil society organizations often employ experts who have specific knowl-edge that citizens do not have, while citizens can more easily recognize local problems and mobilize. Our results, which show that there is a weak recogni- tion of civil society organizations and citizens' initiatives in all cities except

Rijeka, are in a kind of "conflict" with the results obtained in focus groups, in which respondents mostly discuss "bottom up" initiatives. For example, an expert from Osijek was praising the cooperation of experts with civil society organizations. It is often the case that in such organizations the initiators themselves are experts or interested citizens who often work in cooperation with spatial experts. The next interlocutor warns of the conflict between experts and formal authorities, which often neglect the opinion of the profession.

The Osijek architects are taking the side of the citizens. For the most part, we react together with all the associations and we are not exactly on good terms with the city administration, because in fact we criticize them the most. They call us when something occurs, but when we say what we think, we are no longer welcome. (Architect, Osijek)

The great role of civil society is mentioned by one of the interviewed urban sociologists from Split, but he also notes that this engagement should be in synergy with other stakeholders, the professionals and the authorities. He believes that bottom-up initiatives are the most effective, and is disappointed with the collaboration of the authorities and experts. The balance of all types of actors is an important part of democratization of the decision-making process.

Civil society has been very involved and it seems to me that this is where the greatest effort comes from, because the only thing one hears comes from those levels, but that is not enough. There must be

a balance between the influence of civil society, the architectural and urban planning professions […]. (Urban sociologist, Split)

Considering that the possibilities of citizens' legal influence on urban plan- ning are seriously limited, because citizens can only get involved in the planning process at its end in the so-called public debates on already completed proposals, it can be concluded that for more active engagement of citizens, among other things, it would be necessary to implement legal changes (Zlatar Gamberožić 2019). Some of the issues regarding citizen participation in the decision-making process are highlighted by the following respondent, who points out that comments made in public debates about future spatial planning are not published publicly.

It is interesting that the citizens reacted to the change in the spatial plan with some 170 comments, and I would say that this is a prominent case where the citizens reacted in the right way again. Although they reacted very late, at the wrong moment, and their comments were not transparent to the public. (Architect, Osijek)

It is civil initiatives, although often serving as the only answer to problems, that are essential and almost the only instance through which citizens can express their opinion as well as point out problematic situations. It is not easy to predict the success or failure of citizens' initiatives, as well as their duration, which mainly depends on the stage of the decision-making process in which citizens become involved in considering the given issue.

Conclusion

In this paper, our aim was to show the level of (non)participation and potential obstacles for it in four Croatian cities from two aspects: 1) Residents' partic- ipation in the formal structures of local government and obstacles to their par- ticipation; and 2) citizens' involvement in the neighborhood.

The results point out that the participation of citizens in Zagreb and other cities is minimal. In comparison with economic and political actors, profes- sionals and civil society actors are also not sufficiently involved in the urban planning process (Zlatar Gamberožić 2019).

The topics that stood out in our research are: distrust in the system and lack of information about key actors in local policies. The most significant topic identified is the distrust in the system, which is confirmed by recent research (Gvozdanovićet al. 2024; Karajić2024). This is evidenced by people's reluctance to attend meetings or consider desired changes, as they believe their input will not be respected or taken into account. With this result we confirmed our theoretical hypothesis also through qualitative research.

The results of the quantitative analysis regarding non-participation in the activities of local communities indicate that the majority of residents think that they cannot personally influence decision-making or, at the very least, are uncertain about the possibility of influencing decision-making concerning the quality of life. Unequal recognition of key actors in local policies by residents indicates

an uneven distribution of political power in smaller towns between city authorities and local authorities because the latter are less recognized as decision-makers.

Combined with the variable of their actual participation in the last 5 years, as well as with the findings from the qualitative research (with the emerged theme "distrust in the system"), these results largely confirm the hypothesis that the citizens who do not believe that their participation impacts the decision-making process are far less likely to participate. Citizens are usually skeptical or not familiar with whether the city government, local committee and citizens' initiatives are active in their neighborhoods at all, which means that a significant part of citizens does not recognize formal structures of participation. From the citizens' perspective, formal structures hardly involve the citizens in their activities. At the same time, citizens who have been active in an association or civic initiative are significantly more likely to believe that they can influence decisions made regarding their neighborhood/estate, and they are also more aware of the activities of the local community: they feel that their local community is active.

The work of local committees is considered by many participants to be an important instance, especially when it comes to the development of urban infrastructure. They also consider it as a place of communication and contact with other residents that should be active enough so that they prevent situations involving mass protests by inhabitants, which are most often led by citizen initiatives or civil society organizations accompanied by great media attention. In estates where there was an escalation of relations with the authorities in connec- tion with the estate's development, the residents recognize the initiatives that stopped the devastation of the mostly public and green spaces.

The sporadic activism of citizens is directed toward issues that frustrate them or for which they have a cynical view of conventional political solutions (issue-based activism) (Barret and Pachi 2019). The interest in addressing various problems emerges and is organized on a case-by-case basis rather than through formal political institutions, thus it can be said that it challenges political authority under certain circumstances (Tarrow 1998). Activism is most often characterized by personal interest in solving problems and connection with everyday life, experiences, and practices (Barret and Pachi 2019). Active residents are particularly interested in matters of the basic or primary level of quality of life, such as issues of ecology (planning of the environment and public areas), construction of public infrastructure and institutions which are often inadequate, especially in new estates, and regulation of traffic and parking, which is often problematic (lacking) in the old and new estates.

Therefore, according to the research results, participation is mostly reactive in nature (according to the results of focus groups), i.e. it appears when a problem arises, because there is no system that would efficiently involve citizens and residents to reach a high level on the scale of participation. A very low level of participation and the participatory process has already been detected in Croatian cities (SvirčićGotovac and Zlatar Gamberožić 2020; Svirčić Gotovac, Zlatar Gamberožić, and Nikšič 2021).

From this perspective, it is clear why reacting to certain, mostly burning, problems in the estate is the most common way to participate. We understand this as people giving up fighting for important issues and problems in their community and estate, whereby residents become more and more alienated from influencing politics and more and more passive (Dekker and van Kempen 2008). Reactionist activism is therefore a very important phase or moment in the societies such as Croatian that have not yet established full participatory democracy.

It is of key importance to set new priorities in housing that would include the participation of citizens and their activation in matters of housing and the estate, breaking the current power structure (predominance of economic and political actors) and the neoliberal system based on the market, in which the voice of citizens is less important in relation to profit. European urban policies are based on

this very principle (Sadıkoğlu and Özsoy 2020). This should be achieved both through the activation of formal government channels, as well as through local committees and local initiatives and the city government, but primarily through the cooperation of the civil sector with residents and experts in the form of education. This would make it possible to reach a higher level of knowledge of housing and estate issues, as well as help to involve residents in different stages of the participation process (Stenberg 2018).

Future research should be more qualitative and should approach cities as case studies in order to gain a thorough insight into the question why participation is low or reactive in a certain city or estate.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1.	Although there are ethnic minorities in Croatia, the population at the time of the research was mainly homogeneous, so we were not considering ethnicity as an important factor in our research.

2.	This is a name of a civil society organization.

3.	Zagreb is the capital city of Croatia and has 767,131 inhabitants. Split is the second-largest city in Croatia with 160,577 inhabitants, Rijeka has 107,964 inhabitants, and Osijek has 96,313 inhabitants (Croatian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census). Osijek is the center of Eastern Croatia, Rijeka is the largest port city in Croatia, located in the western part of the country. Split is the center of southern Croatia and the largest city in Dalmatia.

4.	I can personally influence the decisions made regarding my estate (construction, infrastructural changes). – 1 completely disagree – 5 completely agree.

5.	The local community (town district, local board, citizen/resident initiatives, etc.) in my estate is active. – 1 completely disagree – 5 completely agree.

6.	Who is the main actor in local politics or activities that happen in the estate? (single answer):

1	– city government

2	– city quarter/local committees

3	– civil society organizations/NGOs

4   – residents/resident initiatives

5   – someone else, who:

7.   In the last 5 years, have you been active in an organization/initiative that had the goal of improving the neighborhood/estate? – yes/no

8.   If yes, what kind of participation/activities?

9.   Reactionist is in this context not meant in the meaning conservative (tending to favor established ideas, conditions, or institutions), but as a way of reacting to some previous unwanted action (action–reaction).

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[i] Forms of local self-government are city districts and local committees. Residents of the city district elect the city district council, which has its own president. Local committees are established for a particular part of a city district, an individual estate or several interconnected smaller estates, or a part of a larger estate that forms a separate entity in relation to other parts. The bodies of the local committee are the council of the local committee, whose members are elected by all citizens with the right to vote who reside in the territory of the local committee, and the president of the council of the local committee, whom the members of the council elect among themselves (City of Zagreb, Local self-government 2023).