
Cultural Policy in Rural Areas of Serbia: Socialism – Postsocialism*

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Abstract:

The Republic of Serbia is a European country with a distinct developmental trajectory and marked discontinuities in its cultural policy toward rural areas since the Second World War. This paper examines the characteristics and transformations of cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia across two key periods – the socialism (1945–1989) and the post-socialism (1989–present), highlighting how ideological, political, and economic contexts have shaped cultural approaches in rural settings. The aim of the paper is to provide an overview and critical analysis of the main goals, instruments, and measures of the cultural policy in Serbia's rural areas, examined at the intersection of differing ideological paradigms and socio-political systems. The research employs qualitative and interpretative methodological approaches, focusing on a diachronic comparative analysis of secondary data sources. The findings indicate that cultural policy in rural areas in Serbia has evolved from an ideologically driven, enlightenment-inspired dogmatic model during socialism to a market-conditioned fragmentation and commodification of cultural practices in the post-socialist era. This trajectory of cultural development in rural areas, with all its advantages and limitations, has resulted in diverse resistant and adaptive responses from local communities, which are analyzed in this paper through selected case studies.

Keywords: Rural Culture, Cultural Development, Rural Communities, Cultural Transformations.

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1. Introduction:

The need for critical reflection on the role of culture in social change – and for identifying an appropriate model of cultural policy – is of great importance today, both in development studies and within the framework of public policy in contemporary states. Within the goals of sustainable development, where culture is considered the fourth pillar of sustainability (Hawkes, 2001; UNESCO, 2016), it is emphasized that, alongside the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development, full societal progress can be achieved by recognizing cultural specificities and activating the cultural potential and actors of local communities – including rural ones – and by aligning their development goals with the broader goals of societal development.

Research in the European context indicates that culture has been largely overlooked in rural development studies across several countries, raising important questions about the relevance of culture-based development strategies, when such strategies are applied to rural areas and small towns (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Knox & Mayer, 2012; Lysgård, 2016). This is especially significant given that cultural policy directed toward rural areas remains underdeveloped compared to its urban counterpart (Duxbury, 2021).

The Republic of Serbia (RS) is a country in the Balkans, situated at the crossroads of Central and Eastern Europe. After nearly five decades of communist rule, the early 1990s marked the beginning of a period of complex state and societal transformations. Today, Serbia shares several rural development challenges with other European countries, including demographic decline, population aging, low population density, and limited industrial and service-sector diversity and scale, but it also exhibits distinct socio-cultural features of rural development that became especially pronounced during and after the collapse of socialism.

The main aim of this paper is to provide an overview and critical analysis of the key goals,

instruments, and measures of cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia from a diachronic comparative perspective. The focus will be on explaining the specific social, political-ideological, and economic context, as well as analyzing how the cultural institutions, values, and practices of Serbia's rural population have evolved and transformed from the socialist period (1945–1989) to the post-socialist transition (1989–present). This study contributes by offering a multilayered understanding of cultural change dynamics within Serbia's specific socialist and post-socialist context, and by highlighting the role of culture in the social representation and revitalization of rural spaces. In this sense, the paper deepens the understanding of the strengths and limitations of cultural policy in rural areas of post-socialist countries, which have often been marginalized in academic discourse.

1.1. Theoretical Framework and Review of Previous Research Findings:

Rural areas are in constant interaction with regional, national, and global development trends, facing similar structural and developmental challenges as the rest of society. While undergoing similar changes – political systems, ideologies, economic structures, ecological conditions – rural regions also possess unique cultural, social, and territorial capital. These resources, rooted in local knowledge, practices, values, and spatial as well as cultural identities, represent an authentic potential for the sustainable development of rural communities (Duxbury & Campbell, 2009; Ray, 2002).

Despite this, rural areas are often neglected in the development policies of European countries, and within public cultural policies, they face marginalization – especially compared to urban environments (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Duxbury, Garrett-Petts & MacLennan, 2015). In many cases, cultural policy has remained territorially centralized and structured according to urban models, often lacking sufficient sensitivity to the needs and specificities of rural communities (Gibson, Luckman & Willoughby-Smith, 2010). Consequently, in recent years, the Committee of

the Regions of the European Union has placed special emphasis on promoting cultural policies in rural areas within the framework of development strategies, territorial cohesion, and the 2030 Agenda (Cordeiro, 2024).

At the UNESCO international conference in Monaco (1967), cultural policy was defined as “the sum of all conscious and deliberate actions, or inactions, within a community aimed at meeting certain cultural needs through the optimal use of all physical and human resources available to that community at a given moment” (Prnjat, 2006: 58). At that time, the need for developing participatory cultural policies was also emphasized, in which local communities – including those in rural areas – would not be merely passive “objects” of cultural planning, but active “subjects” of cultural development (Mercer, 2006). In this paper, cultural policy is viewed as an important mechanism of intervention by the state and other actors (such as local authorities, the civil sector, and international organizations) in the field of cultural development, which not only shapes the directions of cultural transformation in local communities but also influences internal social dynamics. This approach allows cultural policy to be analyzed not only as a state strategy or administrative and programmatic practice but also as a dynamic interaction between institutions and communities, and between official discourse and everyday practice.

In the former communist countries of Europe, including the contemporary Balkan states, cultural policy cannot be separated from the broader context of socialist development and the social and institutional transformations that have characterized the post-socialist transition.¹ Numerous studies (Swain, 2000; Turnock, 1995) show that these processes deeply impacted all spheres of society, including rural communities facing complex economic and cultural adaptation challenges during the transition. In the 1990s, research teams from the Liverpool Centre for Central and Eastern European Studies identified

key directions in the post-socialist rural transition in Central European and Balkan countries.² Although the cultural dimension was not the primary focus, these studies, viewed with some temporal distance, offer valuable insights into the broader changes that indirectly influenced the transformation of cultural policies in rural post-socialist areas. Nigel Swain (2000) particularly emphasizes the flexibility of rural communities in adapting to new conditions, highlighting the dominance of small family farms as the main rural production model after the collapse of large socialist cooperatives. While during the socialist period agriculture was often a supplementary activity alongside industrial labor, in the post-socialist context it became a means of economic compensation and survival – especially in conditions of deindustrialization, privatization, and general market uncertainty (Swain, 2000).

These findings open up avenues for deeper research into the developmental cultural specificities of post-socialist countries, the functioning of cultural institutions in rural areas, as well as the transformation of local practices and values. In this context, the case of Serbia – a country marked by pronounced discontinuities in cultural policy toward rural areas and a specific transitional trajectory – represents a particularly relevant framework for analysis.

2. Methodological Framework:

The research employed qualitative and interpretative methodological approaches aimed at understanding cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia as a complex and multilayered phenomenon shaped at the intersection of institutional frameworks, local needs, and broader socio-political processes. The methodological framework is based on a diachronic comparative analysis of cultural policy in Serbia’s rural areas across two key social contexts: the socialist period (1945–1989) and the post-socialist period (from

¹ For a more detailed discussion on cultural policy in the Balkans, see Стевановић (2013: 243–259).

² The research did not cover Serbia, but focused on rural communities in other post-socialist countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Central Europe), as well as rural communities in Bulgaria and Poland (the Balkans).

1989 onwards). This analysis enables an examination of the specificities of general societal and cultural development, as well as the transformation of cultural institutions, practices, and values during the transition between these two socio-political systems.

The research focused on the following key questions: a) How did the dominant ideology, political, and economic circumstances influence the formation and implementation of cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia during the socialist and post-socialist periods? b) Did cultural policy in Serbia during the socialist period take into account the specific needs and potentials of villages and the peasantry, or did it neglect them? c) In what ways did rural communities participate in the creation and implementation of cultural content and initiatives? d) How did cultural institutions, practices, and values in rural areas of Serbia change with the transition from socialism to post-socialism?

The research utilized secondary data sources, including scholarly literature in the fields of cultural policy, rural sociology, and transition studies, as well as legal and strategic documents related to culture and rural development in the Republic of Serbia. It also drew on reports, evaluations, and statistical databases from relevant domestic and international institutions and organizations (e.g., the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, and UNESCO). The units of analysis included institutional forms of cultural policy (such as community centers, cultural-artistic societies, and mass media), public policies and strategic documents, as well as cultural practices and forms of participation in local communities (educational and domestic workshops, cultural events, amateur cultural activities, etc.).

The research approach is fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing on concepts from cultural sociology, public policy theory, and rural studies. Emphasis is placed on contextualizing cultural development trends and transformations in rural areas of Serbia, with the aim of

understanding cultural policy as a process involving dominant ideologies and power relations, institutional structures, local resources, and the specific needs of the rural population.

3. Results and Discussion:

3.1. Cultural Policy in Rural Areas of Serbia during the Socialist Period

The end of World War II marked a significant turning point for Serbia in terms of ideological and social transformation – namely, the transition from a constitutional monarchy (within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) to a socialist order within a multiethnic federative state. This process began with the establishment of the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia (DFY), which was later reorganized into the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY), and finally, in 1963, adopted its definitive name – the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

The new social reality entailed a profound reconstruction of political institutions and social relations, most notably through accelerated industrialization within a state-planned economy, rapid urbanization, the abolition of private property, political centralization within a one-party system, and the establishment of communist rule (Szelényi, 1996). According to the first post-war census in 1948, as much as 82.4% of the total population of Yugoslavia lived in rural areas, while in Serbia this figure was 72% (Дробњаковић & Кокотовић Каназир, 2025: 49). Within this context, Yugoslavia underwent the fastest process of deagrarianization in the world – during the last 50 years of the 20th century, around eight million people left the countryside, mostly moving to urban areas. In contrast, similar processes in other European countries took up to 150 years (Puljiz, 2002). This intense migration caused a massive rural exodus, unplanned urban expansion, and the emergence of new cultural models. Combined with a slow and fragmented agrarian reform, it led to the gradual depopulation of villages and the decline of the previously dominant social role of the peasantry, which was replaced by the rise of the working class.

The culture in socialist Yugoslav society, founded on Marxist ideology, had a clearly defined social function: the education, emancipation, and political mobilization of the working class, as well as the promotion of new values such as collectivism, equality, social justice, brotherhood, and unity – particularly within the context of the multiethnic structure of the Yugoslav federation. In accordance with the Marxist understanding of culture as a superstructure – that is, a system of ideas, values, and institutions that reflect and legitimize the economic base of society – cultural policy served as an instrument to consolidate the socialist order and shape a "new" social consciousness. To recall, Marxist theory emphasized the necessity to overcome class differences not only economically but also through the transformation of cultural patterns – a process described as a "cultural revolution from above," in which the state played a key role in producing and distributing cultural content (Gramsci, 1971). In this context, culture was understood as a field of symbolic struggle, where the hegemony of the working class and its ideological dominance had to be secured, especially in relation to the peasantry.

Taking into account the different approaches to managing social development during various periods of socialism in Yugoslavia (and Serbia), it is generally possible to distinguish and analyze two organizational methods for instrumentalizing the goals of cultural policy in rural areas: centralized and decentralized (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997: 21).

- **Centralized cultural policy:** In the early years following the establishment of the socialist order and the post-war reconstruction of the country, cultural policy in Yugoslavia – and consequently in Serbia – was largely centralized and ideologically instrumentalized. It was not an autonomous sphere but rather an instrument of political struggle and ideological shaping, which was particularly evident through the activities of AGITPROP (Department for Agitation and Propaganda). During the period of centralized administration between 1945 and 1953,

AGITPROP controlled cultural, artistic, and media content in accordance with party objectives. With the rise of communist power under Josip Broz Tito, which imposed an authoritarian political culture, this influence extended across all areas of cultural creation and development. Socialist realism was actively promoted, while elements of traditional, religious, and "bourgeois" culture were suppressed.

Such an approach had particularly significant consequences for the rural population, which was demographically dominant but culturally and politically marginalized. Despite the rhetorical commitment to equality, rural culture during this period of socialist development remained subordinate to urban culture, with peasants often portrayed as bearers of "underdeveloped" and "outdated" practices in need of modernization. Considering the village and peasantry insufficiently compatible with the new socialist ideals, the authorities prioritized literacy and basic education of the peasantry as a primary goal of post-war cultural policy. However, within the prevailing enlightenment-dogmatic model of cultural policy, the specificities of rural areas and rural culture – which remained an important part of the collective identity – were neither significantly recognized nor empowered. This was particularly the case because one of the fundamental goals of cultural policy, aligned with the political interests of the Communist Party, was to forge a political, economic, and cultural alliance between peasants and workers (proletariat). Thus, within the centralized cultural policy of that era, rural culture was unjustly reduced to a traditionalist-folkloric representation and utilized as a tool for national homogenization and political loyalty (Puljiz, 2002; Jović, 2003).

Due to this programmatic orientation, the overall cultural policy toward the countryside in post-war Yugoslavia (and consequently Serbia) can be characterized as a policy of cultural transformation of the village. Its primary goal was the "elimination" or "abolition" of differences between village and city life, implying the adaptation of rural areas to the models of urban

life, labor, and cultural production (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997). In practice, this meant that the cultural needs and expressions of rural communities often remained marginalized within official cultural policy, which tended more towards their transformation than their affirmation. Furthermore, cultural infrastructure in villages was underdeveloped, with local cultural centers and amateur societies subordinated to urban administrative centers and party control. Budgetary funds, personnel, and program content were largely allocated to urban areas, while rural regions remained marginally treated within official cultural policy.

The absence of decentralization during this period of socialism and the lack of peasant participation in cultural decision-making processes further deepened the social marginalization and cultural peripheralization of the countryside. Although rich in intangible heritage, rural areas were not perceived as cultural treasures or spaces of creative potential, but rather as a “culturally backward” segment of society that needed to be “culturally uplifted” from above, through interventions from the center of communist power. Instead of enabling the active participation of local populations in shaping cultural content and defining their own needs, rural culture was organized through a top-down approach characteristic of authoritarian cultural policies. This involved attempts to modernize villages and rural culture through institutional instruments such as cultural centers, cultural-artistic societies, and mass educational-ideological campaigns, including literacy programs for peasants, screenings of politically approved films, the organization of so-called “partisan evenings,” courses aimed at educating women (educational-domestic courses), and other institutional and organizational forms aimed at educating, cultivating, and politically instructing the rural population (Коларић & Вукићевић, 2019).

A case study of the educational-domestic courses (in Serbian *prosvetno-domaćinski tečajevi*) held in the villages of Jabuka and Omoljica, in the municipality of Pančevo (Serbia),

sheds light on the specific characteristics, as well as the advantages and limitations, of early organizational forms of cultural and educational work in rural areas, conducted between 1948 and 1954 (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997: 40–41). These courses, conceived as instruments for the emancipation of rural women and the modernization of everyday life, were part of a broader project of cultural transformation of the countryside in post-war Yugoslavia. However, their effects proved to be quite limited. According to available data, fewer than one-quarter of the women enrolled in the three-year course successfully passed both the theoretical and practical components of the instruction. The course program included a wide range of subjects, such as Serbian language, arithmetic, history, geography, hygiene, household management, cooking, and sewing. Additionally, a significant portion of the curriculum consisted of cultural-educational activities, including the preparation of village performances featuring vocal-instrumental acts, folk dances, recitations, short theatrical forms, and similar events. It should be noted that, within the framework of the centralized cultural policy, these programs were subject to strict ideological and administrative control. The courses operated under the direct supervision of state and party bodies, which determined the educational content and oversaw the implementation of the cultural-artistic program (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997: 40).

Despite this, it is undeniable that the educational-domestic courses played an important role – not only in increasing access to education and cultural cultivation for rural women – but also as instruments for enhancing their visibility and participation in cultural life, albeit within the confines of traditional gender hierarchies. However, beyond their limited educational effectiveness, the courses had constrained outcomes in preparing the few participating rural women for everyday life in their communities and for political socialization, i.e., ideological and cultural integration into the new order. Specifically, outside normative frameworks, the socialist identity policy failed to seriously

challenge the power dynamics embedded in gender hierarchies, which diminished the presence and activity of rural women in the public sphere. Although socialism in Yugoslavia introduced formal gender equality, the patriarchal social order in rural areas remained strong, and long-standing gender roles – which upheld male dominance in both private and public spheres – were largely preserved (Hofman, 2008).

This model of cultural policy in Serbia during the early post-war decades reflected a broader trend of paternalism in the cultural development of nearly all socialist countries. Within this framework, cultural differences between rural and urban areas were interpreted as developmental gaps to be overcome through top-down management involving education, cultural standardization, and political mobilization (Ahearne, 2009). Although certain efforts toward decentralization and liberalization of the cultural system were made in the following decades, these cultural asymmetries persisted and continued to shape the marginal position of the countryside within national cultural policy.

- **Decentralized cultural policy:** After a period of strong centralization of cultural policy in Yugoslavia (Serbia) during the early post-war years, there was a gradual shift toward greater pluralism and institutional flexibility, in line with broader socio-political changes of the time. Following the break with the Soviet Union in 1948, Yugoslavia developed its own model of so-called *self-management socialism*, based on the principles of decentralization, workers' self-management, and relative cultural liberalization. This model was ideologically distanced from both Soviet communism and Western capitalism, and Yugoslavia further strengthened its international legitimacy through a key role in the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement.³ Non-alignment was

³ At the First Non-Aligned Conference in Belgrade (1961), the President of the SFRY, Josip Broz Tito, together with leaders such as Nehru (India), Nasser (Egypt), and Sukarno (Indonesia), emerged as one of the key founders and ideologues of the Movement. In Yugoslavia's mediation and balancing between East and West, culture played a significant role – cultural institutions, artists, film festivals,

not only a political strategy but also a specific cultural-civilizational position that allowed Yugoslavia to symbolically present itself as a bridge between East and West, North and South. Within this framework of foreign policy positioning – especially during the 1960s and 1970s – there was increasing openness to various cultural influences, both from the East and the West. This openness was reflected in domestic cultural practices and policies. Cultural life within the country became more diverse, and cultural institutions, including those in rural areas, were granted somewhat greater autonomy in shaping their programs. This period was characterized by the strengthening of local cultural centers, the development of amateur art, cultural and artistic associations, as well as attempts to involve the broader community in cultural life – all of which manifested a shift in cultural policy from strict central control toward more localized decision-making and engagement.

A particular influence came from the French model of cultural policy, led by André Malraux, who advocated the idea of cultural democratization – a concept aimed at broadening access to culture for wide segments of the population, not just privileged urban and educated elites. Although ideologically distinct, Yugoslav (Serbian) cultural policy during that period adopted many similar goals related to the democratization and decentralization of culture (Kolaric & Vukićević, 2019):

- a) Expansion of cultural infrastructure beyond urban centers, particularly at the municipal and village levels;
- b) Increased citizen participation in cultural activities through the establishment and development of cultural centers, rural cultural-artistic associations, and local events;
- c) Adaptation of cultural content to the specific characteristics of communities, including rural ones, rather than literal replication of

and cultural exchanges were used as instruments of *soft power*, through which Yugoslavia built its own international cultural identity.

centralized models or imposition of urban culture in a rural context.

The cultural shift that followed the adoption of the 1974 Constitution in Yugoslavia provided the formal legal foundation for decentralizing the cultural system, transferring significant authority from the federal level to the republican, provincial, and municipal levels.⁴ This meant that local communities, including rural ones, gained a greater degree of autonomy in planning, organizing, and financing cultural activities. This created an additional normative and institutional framework for implementing the concept of self-management in culture, primarily through the *Self-Managed Interest Communities* (SMICs), which began to be established in 1974. These communities played a significant role in planning and implementing cultural development at the local level. The SMICs served as a bridge between employees in the cultural sector and all other employed individuals, who were required to allocate 0.32% of their personal income specifically for financing programs, tasks, and operations in the field of culture. In this way, the budgetary system of cultural financing was replaced by a contribution system of “working people and citizens” within the framework of so-called *self-management agreements*, which involved decisions about cultural content and the application of specific models, goals, and instruments of cultural policy at various levels of governance and in different local contexts.

However, since the majority of the peasantry, especially farmers, were not socially or politically active, they were effectively excluded from the self-management agreement process regarding cultural development, despite the fact that working peasants (those employed in agricultural cooperatives, industry, services, and other sectors)

contributed financially to cultural development (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997: 63–67).

Generally speaking, during the period of decentralization and self-management in the cultural sector, a rich infrastructure of state cultural institutions was developed in line with prevailing European and global trends. Numerous cultural centers, houses of culture, workers’ and people's universities, youth centers, and similar multifunctional cultural and educational institutions were established during this time. This developmental trajectory not only involved significant financial investments but also reflected a clear political will to bring culture closer to the widest possible audience and to reduce social and infrastructural barriers to meeting cultural needs – particularly in rural and peripheral areas.

Rural cultural centers, or houses of culture (known as *domovi kulture*), predominantly built during the 1950s and 1960s, deserve special analytical attention. These were most often constructed as part of so-called cooperative homes (*zadružni domovi*), multifunctional buildings that combined cultural, administrative, and economic functions. Within a single structure, one would typically find shops, cooperative offices, meeting rooms, as well as halls with stages and seating designed to host cultural programs, theatre performances, film screenings, celebrations, and other events. These buildings were frequently erected through collective labor and voluntary “work actions” by local residents, which gave them additional symbolic value – they represented a tangible expression of joint community engagement aimed at the modernization and “cultural elevation” of the village, aligned with the ideological principles of the socialist state at the time. In this way, houses of culture functioned both as instruments of top-down cultural policy and as spaces for expressing peasant solidarity and grassroots local initiative.

An interesting example is the House of Culture in the village of Mladenovo, in the municipality of Bačka Palanka (Serbia), established in 1952 through the adaptation of a former German tavern dating back to World War

⁴ The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was a state composed of six socialist republics – Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia – with two autonomous provinces within Serbia: Kosovo and Vojvodina. Municipalities or associations of municipalities functioned as lower-level administrative-territorial units, which included numerous villages within their jurisdiction.

II. The local community repurposed the building, assigning it a new function as a venue for the local cultural-artistic society and a center for various cultural and educational programs (Шљукић & Јанковић, 2015: 197–198). While numerous rural cultural centers subsequently lost their functions or fell into disrepair due to insufficient funding and lack of professional personnel, this particular institution remains operational to the present day, owing to sustained local support and active community involvement. This case illustrates that, notwithstanding various challenges, houses of culture constitute a significant element in the history of cultural policy directed toward rural areas, fulfilling multifaceted roles ranging from sites of political and ideological mobilization to centers of education, cultural participation, and social interaction within rural communities.

Alongside the Self-Management Interest Communities in Culture, a fundamental institutional framework for the implementation of cultural policy in rural areas during the socialist period was constituted by the *Cultural-Educational Communities* (CECs). Established in the 1950s and further consolidated following the constitutional reforms of 1974, the CECs were envisioned as instruments of decentralization and cultural democratization (Dragojević, 2011; Коларић & Вукићевић, 2019). Their primary functions encompassed the coordination of rural cultural centers, the support of cultural-artistic societies, the promotion of amateur creativity, and the organization of cultural events. Although formally operating under principles of self-management, CECs in practice adhered closely to party directives and maintained institutional ties with the organs of the League of Communists. The effectiveness and scope of their activities, however, were contingent upon the specific local context, the dedication of cultural workers, and the cultural needs of the community.

Despite the proclaimed commitment to cultural democratization, a fundamental limitation of cultural policy toward rural areas during this period resided in the very conceptualization of democratization itself, particularly in the initial

phases of its implementation in rural Serbia. Specifically, cultural policy predominantly emphasized the dissemination of elite cultural content, accompanied by efforts to render this cultural framework accessible and acceptable to all social strata, including the peasantry. The activities of the CECs were especially significant in the cultural modernization of villages, manifested through the organization of courses, literary evenings, exhibitions, performances, tours of professional theaters, and other educational and artistic programs. This dynamic exposes a critical paradox inherent to the policy of the time: although ostensibly decentralized and designed to engage a broader population, cultural policy was in reality grounded not in genuine participatory mechanisms but in a top-down model of cultural transmission. Given the rural population's limited educational and cultural preparedness, as well as their often-limited interest in elite cultural products, they predominantly remained passive recipients of a systemically and normatively imposed cultural agenda.⁵ Consequently, the authorities' objective to "abolish" traditional rural culture through cultural enlightenment ultimately proved unsuccessful.

This resulted in a clear mismatch between the institutional cultural offer and the local reception capacity of the rural population, leading to persistently low levels of cultural participation among the peasantry, a continued reliance on traditional forms of expression, and the further marginalization of villages within the broader cultural system. Such a policy failed to acknowledge the deeply embedded traditional cultural patterns that rural communities had preserved and transmitted intergenerationally over

⁵ The satirical and dramatic feature film *A Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja* (1973) offers a critical portrayal of the practice of staging serious theatrical repertoire in rural communities. The plot centers on the president of an agricultural cooperative in a small village who, on the anniversary of his re-election, orders the village schoolteacher to prepare and stage a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with the local residents. The film depicts the clumsy yet humorous attempts of the villagers to engage with high literature – despite lacking education, formal training, and proper stage design (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0072025/?ref=ttpl_ov_bk).

centuries. These practices were not only integral to the daily lives of rural populations but also constituted a vital component of their collective identity. As Đukić Dojčinović aptly observes, “this kind of policy was restrictive towards the real cultural needs of the peasantry and the actual cultural situation in the village; therefore, it was not grounded in real cultural potentials, which is why it was detached from reality and did not correspond with it at all” (Đukić Dojčinović, 2003: 24).

In an attempt to address some of the limitations and mismatches in the programmatic conception of cultural policy in rural areas, the initiative *Village Gatherings* (in Serbian *Susreti sela*) was established. It originated from a cultural-educational campaign entitled *We Are Looking for the Happiest Village*, organized in 1961 by the Cultural-Educational Community of the Municipality of Pančevo (Serbia), and initially encompassed all villages within the municipality (Flora, 1978: 182). Revived and expanded in 1965 under the name *Susreti sela*, the initiative developed into one of the most prominent cultural practices in rural Serbia, continuing until the mid-1990s. Despite being a form of state-supported public programming, *Susreti sela* remained largely localized in character, primarily engaging rural audiences and attracting limited interest from urban publics. Nevertheless, organizers and observers frequently emphasized the strong interest and active involvement of local communities. As Ana Hofman (2008) notes, cultural activities such as *Susreti sela* played a significant role in the everyday lives of rural inhabitants, fostering social cohesion and a sense of inclusion. The example of Banatsko Novo Selo (Serbia) illustrates the broad demographic reach of these gatherings, which engaged all generations and recognized social groups often marginalized in rural settings – particularly women, the elderly, and youth. The inclusion of prominent guests – journalists, athletes, actors, singers, and writers – further enhanced the symbolic value of the events, serving as a form of cultural encouragement and acknowledgment for the rural population (Flora, 1978: 182).

It is important to emphasize that, within the framework of decentralized cultural policy in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), mass media – particularly radio and television – played a crucial role in promoting the visibility of rural areas, affirming rural identities, and serving as a symbolic bridge between village and city. Notably, one of the most popular radio programs of the period, “The Cheerful Village” (in Serbian *Selo veselo*), was recorded in numerous villages across Serbia and Yugoslavia, including the aforementioned Banatsko Novo Selo (Flora, 1978: 183). Broadcast on Radio Belgrade from 1965 to 1988, this program provided a platform for talented and humorous villagers – even those from small and remote mountain settlements – to publicly showcase their skills in singing, instrumental performance, acting, poetry recitation, and storytelling. Through its wide reach and emphasis on popular participation, *Selo veselo* contributed not only to the cultural visibility of rural communities, but also to their symbolic integration into the broader Yugoslav public sphere.

Despite the fact that, by the early 1970s, approximately 75% of rural households in Yugoslavia owned radio receivers and nearly 60% possessed television sets, research indicates that media consumption in rural areas remained largely selective, oriented primarily toward entertainment, leisure, and relaxation (Đukić Dojčinović, 1997: 111). The impact of cultural-educational and scientific programming on the rural population was, by contrast, relatively marginal. Given the evident interest in media content pertaining to rural life and agriculture – among both rural audiences and urban populations, particularly first-generation urban migrants who, despite spatial relocation, continued to uphold rural cultural values – it may be argued that mass media functioned as a key mediator between rural and urban cultures. During the 1980s, this dynamic became particularly pronounced with the emergence of the so-called *neofolk* culture (Dragičević Šešić, 1994), disseminated through the domestic cultural industry. This phenomenon marked the entry of

newly composed mass culture into rural environments. The resulting hybrid *rurban* (rural + urban) cultural model represents a complex interweaving of traditional and modern elements; it blends the functional with the aesthetic, and the authentic with the pseudo-cultural. It combines folkloric motifs and values rooted in traditional rural culture with commercialized and popularized forms of elite and urban cultural production, thereby reflecting both continuity and transformation within the cultural landscape of socialist and post-socialist Serbia.

On the one hand, the cultural policy of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which supported rural festivals and fairs (including local markets, *slava* celebrations, and sports competitions), as well as media programming aligned with the values and needs of rural communities, contributed to the development of authentic cultural practices, the preservation of local traditions, and the more active participation of rural inhabitants in the cultural life of their communities. These initiatives functioned as key mechanisms for channelling amateur cultural activities in villages, primarily sustained through the efforts of local enthusiasts and cultural-artistic associations. Within participatory models of amateurism, the rural population was directly engaged in the organization and implementation of cultural events (Hofman, 2008).

However, the growing influence of newly composed mass culture within rural areas led to significant cultural transformation. The traditional festivity – characterized by the active cultural engagement of the peasantry – increasingly gave way to spectacles marked by passive consumption of cultural and media content. As a result, the traditional amateur cultural scene, once rooted in local initiatives and collective labor, gradually lost its significance (Moren, 1979: 72). Although newly composed mass culture was in fundamental contradiction with the officially promoted enlightenment-dogmatic and elitist model of cultural policy, the state implicitly tolerated – and at times even facilitated – the dissemination of *neofolk* culture. In doing so, it enabled the

reproduction of a cultural model that, despite its ideological ambiguity, effectively served the socialist project's broader goals of cultural homogenization between urban and rural spaces. This dynamic further illustrates the ambivalent role of the state in shaping cultural practices in rural Serbia during the socialist period.

3.2. Post-Socialist Cultural Policy in Rural Areas of Serbia

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of communist ideology across Europe, the former socialist states embarked on processes of profound economic and political transformation. Between 1991 and 1992, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated, leading to the political independence of its constituent republics. These newly independent states experienced a unique and complex transitional trajectory, as the dissolution of the federal state was accompanied by armed conflicts throughout the territories of the former republics. Unlike many Eastern Bloc countries, which rapidly initiated democratic transitions after the collapse of socialism, Serbia entered a period of the *blocked transition* during the 1990s (Lazić, 2005). The era of nationalist authoritarianism under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević (1989–2000) was marked by widespread societal criminalization and international isolation, significantly hindering Serbia's democratic development. A genuine transition towards democracy only commenced following the so-called October 5th Revolution in 2000⁶ (Gordi, 2001). In its quest for a new national identity, Serbia decisively distanced itself from its communist legacy and reoriented its socio-political course towards liberal democracy. However, as with many Central and Eastern European countries during the post-socialist transformation, Serbia faced considerable political instability characterized by the formal introduction, but ineffective implementation, of a

⁶ Following mass civil protests, the regime of Slobodan Milošević was overthrown, and power was taken over by a coalition of 18 opposition parties known as the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS).

parliamentary multiparty system; unresolved economic relations marked by the coexistence of various ownership forms despite dominant privatization efforts; rhetorical overemphasis on the importance of the market without the establishment of genuine market mechanisms and a liberal economy; a resurgence of nationalism; as well as the abolition of ideological censorship being replaced by censorship based on religious and national criteria (Dragičević Šešić & Stojković, 2011: 41).

In the post-socialist period, the urban population in Serbia became predominant, although rural areas still accounted for over 85% of the country's territory. Concurrently, the high dependence of the rural population on agricultural employment during the early years of transition positioned Serbia among the most agrarian countries in Europe, despite a steady decline in agriculture's contribution to GDP after 2000 (Bogdanov, 2007: 32). These processes directly reflect broader consequences of the transition from a planned to a market economy, which was not accompanied by balanced regional development nor by adequate consideration of the cultural and social needs of all population segments. The research (Cvejić et al., 2010) indicates negative developmental trends in rural areas throughout the post-socialist period, including intensive depopulation and feminization, population aging (with a high proportion of individuals over 65 years of age), an unfavorable educational structure, high unemployment, material poverty, and pronounced social and cultural deprivation.

• **Blocked Transition and Cultural Development in Rural Areas:** During the early years of the so-called “blocked transition” or pre-transition period, the state encountered significant challenges in planning and implementing cultural development, with rural areas among the most severely affected. A sudden rupture occurred with many of the positive socialist achievements in the cultural field and with the previous model of cultural policy, which – despite ideological constraints – had provided institutional and

programmatic support for cultural activities across the country, including in rural communities. Following the abolition of the self-management system and the Self-Managed Interest Communities in culture, which were based on the principle of social agreement, the governance of cultural development was recentralized and placed under the full control of the state, i.e., an authoritarian regime (Đukić Dojčinović, 2003: 34–35). Under new models of cultural financing – ranging from statism-based state funds to a classical budgetary system in which the state retained direct control over resource allocation – authorities predominantly regarded cultural expenditures as a cost rather than a developmental investment. Instead of the previous cultural policy model founded on developmental objectives and Enlightenment principles, the dominant trend became the introduction of market mechanisms, project-based financing, and fragmented models of cultural governance.

The lack of investment in cultural infrastructure, the reduction of programmatic offerings, and the absence of strategic planning contributed to a deepening cultural deprivation among the population of Serbia, particularly outside urban centers. These circumstances had a markedly adverse impact on cultural development in rural areas, which became increasingly neglected, with rural communities left isolated from decision-making centers and excluded from cultural policy frameworks. Under such conditions, the institutional and financial capacities for implementing local cultural policies were significantly weakened, resulting in the closure of numerous rural cultural centers (*domovi kulture*). The vibrant amateur cultural life in villages, once widespread and institutionally supported during the socialist period, was progressively supplanted by the passive consumption of media content within a populist, newly composed cultural model, alongside the continued presence of traditional practices and values in everyday life. In a context marked by overall economic insecurity and struggles for basic survival, the cultural life of rural communities in Serbia was imperiled not only by

diminished resources and institutional neglect but also by a lack of participatory motivation and coherent development strategies capable of actively engaging the rural population in shaping their own socio-cultural environment.

At the same time, the reaffirmation of Serbian national and cultural identity became a priority within what was effectively an implicit cultural policy. The concern for the "health and survival of the nation" was driven by the interethnic wars taking place in the former Yugoslavia, as well as broader geopolitical circumstances (such as international embargoes and the NATO bombing of Serbia), which further restricted the space for diverse and locally relevant cultural initiatives. Rather than adhering to principles of accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability, cultural development in rural areas of Serbia thus became collateral damage of a centralized and ideologically instrumentalized cultural policy model – one shaped amid political instability, social upheaval, and economic crisis.

• **Cultural Policy in Rural Areas of Serbia after 2000 – Between Tradition and New Cultural Challenges:** Following the political changes, the new democratic government, guided by reformist intentions, endeavored to address the inherited challenges within society and culture, activate existing cultural resources, and revitalize the deteriorated cultural infrastructure. The overarching aim was to steer cultural development despite adverse transitional conditions. However, despite declarative commitments to reform and modernization of the cultural sector, changes in the legislative framework, funding mechanisms, institutional structures, and human resource policies were implemented gradually, partially, and without systematic consistency.⁷ The

⁷ For example, with the adoption of the Law on Culture of the Republic of Serbia in 2009 (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 72/2009), the previous Law on Activities of General Interest in the Field of Culture from 1992 (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 49/1992) was repealed. This marked the introduction of new formal-legal regulations in the cultural sector of Serbia after nearly two decades. Although the new law mandated the development of a national strategy for cultural development no later than one year after its entry into force, the Strategy for Cultural Development of the

significant delay in adopting formal strategic guidance for cultural development in the Republic of Serbia until 2020 evidences insufficient institutional capacity and a relatively low prioritization of culture among political elites, especially when compared to other public policy sectors. Against this backdrop, the impact of cultural reforms in rural areas remained limited and often largely symbolic, particularly in the absence of clearly defined priorities and comprehensive long-term cultural development plans. Nonetheless, the post-socialist period reveals several key transformations that have shaped cultural development in rural Serbia: deinstitutionalization, the cessation of systematic support, market commodification, and the commercialization of media.

With the cessation of state and ideological control over culture – which had been a defining characteristic of the socialist period – the transitional era was marked by a significant reduction, and in some cases a complete withdrawal, of state support for cultural institutions (Dragičević Šešić & Stojković, 2011: 41). This loss of institutional backing disproportionately affected rural areas, where cultural resources had already been limited under the previous system and were predominantly dependent on state infrastructure such as cultural centers, schools, village libraries, and local festivals. Consequently, this process contributed to the progressive erosion of cultural institutions and events that had functioned as central pillars of cultural life in rural communities during socialism.

Furthermore, the new economic environment established after 2000 introduced market logic into the cultural sector, resulting in an unstable, project-based, and competition-driven system of financing. Within this context, rural communities often lacked the capacity, expertise, and institutional support required to effectively respond to the new demands of contemporary

Republic of Serbia (Ministry of Culture RS, 2020) was adopted only in 2020, after several years of delay, with a validity period until 2029.

cultural production and management. Due to limited understanding of, and adaptation to, the neoliberal conditions of a market economy (Bogdanov, 2007), many rural areas continued to rely heavily on strong state support for the funding and organization of cultural life, adhering to models inherited from the socialist period. This form of *Yugonostalgic* expectation of state care was particularly pronounced in villages lacking developed mechanisms for alternative funding sources, such as private sponsors, foundations, or commercial cultural ventures based on ticket sales or the sale of products and services. On the one hand, these new economic conditions precipitated the closure of numerous local cultural institutions, events, and amateur initiatives; on the other hand, they fostered the emergence of adaptive strategies for cultural and economic survival. Consequently, a distinctive hybrid cultural practice began to develop in rural areas, blending elements of local tradition with the imperatives of market dynamics and project-based logic.

In this context, notable examples of adaptive practices for sustainable rural development in Serbia can be identified. The village of Zlakusa, located in the municipality of Užice, represents a particularly significant case of cultural development rooted in the preservation of intangible heritage, local civic engagement, and international recognition. Zlakusa is renowned for its authentic pottery craft, a tradition maintained within families and transmitted across nearly four centuries. This pottery technique involves the artisanal handcrafting of clay cookware on a slow-turning manual wheel, followed by firing in an open flame – an exceptionally rare practice in the wider Balkan region. In 2012, Zlakusa pottery was inscribed in the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Serbia, and in 2020 it was included on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Interestingly, during the process of rural modernization in the second half of the 20th century, the demand for pottery gradually declined, as industrially produced kitchenware increasingly replaced handmade clay vessels in

households. This shift led to a reduction in the number of active artisans in the village. Furthermore, during the socialist period, many residents of Zlakusa were employed in the industrial sector of the nearby town, reflecting the dominant socio-economic trends of the time. Consequently, the centuries-old tradition of ceramic craftsmanship was disrupted, resulting in the partial erosion of certain markers of local identity. However, the socio-economic crisis of the 1990s – marked by the collapse of industry and widespread unemployment during the so-called *blocked transition* – motivated some of the older artisans to return to traditional pottery production.

After 2000, with the emergence of new opportunities for institutional protection, market valorization of traditional crafts, and the development of ethno-tourism, the practice of pottery-making in Zlakusa – along with the broader local community – underwent a process of revitalization. Today, the village hosts a cultural and artistic event that includes pottery colonies, competitions in the preparation of traditional dishes using Zlakusa pottery, and live demonstrations of traditional open-flame pottery firing techniques (Стојановић, 2016: 212–213). Artisans actively collaborate with art schools and universities, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and the modernization of traditional techniques. Additionally, numerous rural households have become involved in the cultural and tourism sectors, offering visitors an authentic experience of local traditions through workshops, accommodations, and the sale of handmade goods.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how the village of Zlakusa has successfully transformed its traditional craft into a cornerstone of contemporary local cultural identity, economic empowerment, and international cultural recognition.

On the other hand, certain adaptive mechanisms have led to the problematic commodification of rural culture. This phenomenon refers to instances in which local

cultural practices, rather than developing organically in response to the needs and values of the community, become recontextualized primarily through the logic of consumption. As a result, rural cultural expressions increasingly resemble products of popular culture and the entertainment industry. As Hofman (2008: 218) notes, “rather than being under the patronage of the state, local culture thus becomes the concern of advertising agencies, media companies, tourism organizations, hospitality businesses, and others, who invest efforts in designing new ways of presenting it as spectacle and show business.” Within this framework, more developed rural areas of Serbia – particularly those in the northern and western regions – have, with the support of local governments, tourism organizations, and the non-governmental sector, undertaken initiatives to reaffirm cultural heritage and devise new forms of its public promotion. While such efforts may contribute to the economic empowerment of local communities and the preservation of selected cultural elements, they often remain limited to the level of symbolic representation. Consequently, their impact on the broader development of local cultural life tends to be superficial, and in some cases, even detrimental—resulting in the simplification, decontextualization, or commercialization of cultural heritage.

A particularly illustrative example of cultural development in rural areas – positioned at the intersection of authenticity preservation and touristic-economic commodification – is the renowned Dragačevo Trumpet Festival in Guča (<https://www.gucafest.rs/>). Established during the socialist period in 1961, the festival was initially conceived as a local platform for the presentation of folk musical creativity, with the primary aim of preserving the trumpet-playing tradition of western Serbia. In its early years, the event was marked by cultural authenticity: alongside the competition of trumpet ensembles performing traditional folk music, the festival featured a variety of folk art displays and contests of strength and ingenuity. Attendance, infrastructural support, and financial investment in the event remained modest throughout the socialist era.

However, following the political changes after 2000, the festival underwent a significant transformation into a large-scale cultural-touristic spectacle, frequently criticized for contributing to the commercialization and vulgarization of tradition (Петровић, 2016: 151). The commercialization of the festival is evident in the exponential rise in attendance – whereas in 2004 the festival drew approximately half a million visitors, recent estimates suggest it now attracts up to one million domestic and international attendees annually. Additionally, the festival has become increasingly reliant on state funding and sponsorship from commercial entities, accompanied by pervasive advertising, a diverse gastronomic offer, and intense media coverage. For instance, the 50th jubilee edition of the festival, held in 2011, was covered by as many as 360 accredited journalists, including 260 from abroad (Петровић, 2016: 193–194).

These data illustrate a broader trend of the *spectacularization* of rural culture, wherein traditional content increasingly loses its original function and meaning, becoming assimilated into systems of mass consumption and media-driven entertainment. Under growing market pressures and the influence of the tourism industry, the festival's program has been significantly expanded with commercial elements that often diverge from the local cultural context – for instance, performances by pop stars, *turbo-folk* concerts, large video displays, mass sales of kitsch souvenirs, excessive alcohol consumption, nationalist iconography, and the overall media spectacle. In this regard, Guča serves as an example of the identity consumption, whereby local culture becomes detached from its organic roots within the community and is instead “packaged” for the purposes of mass audience appeal. While the festival undoubtedly plays an important role in promoting trumpet music and attracting tourists – thereby contributing to both the international visibility of Guča and the economic vitality of the region – scholars have warned that such a model of cultural development poses risks to cultural authenticity, depth of identity, and the participatory role of the local

population, which is increasingly reduced to a logistical and service-oriented function.

Moreover, the Dragačevo Trumpet Festival in Guča exists as a temporally concentrated and symbolically overemphasized event, confined to a few days each year, while the village itself lacks a robust cultural infrastructure or year-round programming. This case thus exemplifies the growing tension between authentic cultural practices and the commodification of rural space in the post-socialist context. The absence of strategic cultural management and coherent policy frameworks for rural Serbia – particularly those capable of mediating between heritage preservation and sustainable tourism – further complicates the integration of such events into long-term cultural development planning.

4. Conclusion:

Cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia, from the socialist period to the contemporary post-socialist context, has followed a developmental trajectory marked by a shift from ideologically motivated enlightenment to market-driven fragmentation and the commodification of cultural practices. The cultural policy instruments employed during socialism reveal underlying tensions between the officially proclaimed goals of literacy, emancipation, and the empowerment of the rural population, on the one hand, and the reality of a strictly centralized and hierarchically organized cultural system, on the other. In the effort of the Communist Party to eliminate the divide between urban and rural spaces, rural communities were positioned as objects of ideological and cultural “re-education.” Through investments in infrastructure and support for amateur artistic production, the state facilitated broader access to cultural content in villages, thereby allowing for a limited degree of local initiative. However, while there were serious efforts to integrate rural areas into the national cultural framework, these initiatives were primarily directed toward societal homogenization rather than the authentic recognition and valorization of local cultural particularities.

Although decentralization within the framework of the self-management system was a proclaimed objective of cultural policy, in practice this process was selective and uneven, ultimately reinforcing existing disparities between urban and rural areas. In this context, decentralization did not inherently lead to the democratization of cultural access, nor did it adequately address the longstanding marginalization of rural cultural needs and potentials. While rooted in modernization ideals, this approach contributed to the emergence of enduring structural imbalances and cultural tensions between rural and urban environments – tensions that were not only spatial, infrastructural, or related to human resources, but also deeply symbolic in nature.

In the early years of the so-called *blocked transition* and the broader social crisis of the 1990s, the cultural infrastructure established during the socialist period began to deteriorate significantly. At the same time, cultural practices and value systems underwent profound transformations: collectivist and enlightenment-oriented models gave way to market-driven, frequently commercialized, and entertainment-focused forms of festival representation of rural culture. As a consequence of economic liberalization and the diminishing role of the state in the cultural domain, rural communities were left without the institutional support, expertise, or resources required to navigate the new market-oriented cultural environment. Nevertheless, in certain instances, new forms of cultural expression emerged – both through the preservation and international recognition of rural heritage and through its reinterpretation in market terms, which in some cases led to the vulgarization of tradition.

Generally, cultural policy in rural areas of Serbia continues to navigate between inherited challenges and emerging developmental initiatives. The transitional context brought about a discontinuity in the cultural domain, preventing the systematic preservation of certain positive legacies from the socialist period – such as targeted cultural financing and self-management agreements. Notably, Self-Management Interest

Communities functioned as semi-state bodies with the authority to shape cultural policy across all levels of governance, bearing resemblance to contemporary decentralized cultural management models adopted in many European countries (Đukić Dojčinović, 2003: 34–35). Although there are currently promising examples of local cultural initiatives supported by the state, civil society, and international funding – often inspired by modern European practices – contemporary developmental approaches in Serbia still insufficiently recognize culture as a strategic resource for sustainable rural development. In light of Serbia’s uneven regional cultural development (Petković, 2025), and the ongoing demographic and economic deterioration of rural areas, it is imperative to affirm the concept of sustainable cultural development – grounded in local realities, participatory in nature, and oriented toward long-term goals. Such an approach would enable the identification, strengthening, and strategic use of the authentic cultural needs and potentials of rural communities.

The central question remains whether local communities will be provided with adequate resources, professional personnel, and sufficient autonomy, so that cultural life in rural areas does not rely solely on the enthusiasm of individuals and interest groups, but becomes a constitutive element of a sustainable and coherent public policy.

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