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URBAN PARTICIPATION FOR SHAPING URBAN NATURE: “URBACT PIONEER ACCELERATOR” PROJECT IN NIŠ, SERBIA

Abstract:

The URBACT EU programme launched a special call – URBACT Pioneer Accelerator – for small-scale projects in the Western Balkan cities in early 2025. Niš in Serbia is among the cities selected to implement it in the topic of urban nature. A specific of this URBACT call is its final step – a concrete pilot at local level. In the case of Niš, it is the regeneration of a small-scale green area in one multi-family residential block from socialist era, located in eastern Niš. The creation of the pilot is implemented through urban participation, which is a backbone of all URBACT projects. The aim of this paper is to explain the steps and dynamics of local participation, which a focus on local adaptations in working with different stakeholders and results from this process.

Keywords: Urban nature, Citizen participation, Housing, socialist urbanism, URBACT

УРБАНА ПАРТИЦИПАЦИЈА ЗА ОБЛИКОВАЊЕ УРБАНЕ ПРИРОДЕ: ПРОЈЕКАТ “URBACT PIONEER ACCELERATOR” У НИШУ У СРБИЈИ

Сажетак:

ЕУ Програм УРБАКТ покренуо је почетком 2025. године „URBACT Pioneer Accelerator“ као посебан позив за мале пројекте у градовима Западног Балкана. Српски Ниш је међу одабраним градовима за његово спровођење у области урбане природе. Посебност овог позива УРБАКТ-а је његов последњи корак – конкретан пилот-пројекат на локалном нивоу. Код Ниша је то обнова мале зелене површине у једном вишепородичном стамбеном блоку у источном Нишу из времена социјализма. Обликовање пилот-пројекта се води уз учешће грађана, што је окосница свих пројеката УРБАКТ-а. Циљ овог рада је објашњење корака и динамике локалног учешћа, са нагласком на локална прилагођавања у раду са различитим актерима и исходе овог процеса.

Кључне ријечи: Урбана природа, Учесће грађана, Становање, Социјалистички урбанизам, УРБАКТ

1. INTRODUCTION – ABOUT URBAN NATURE

Urban areas are among the spaces most severely affected by climate change. The ways in which cities have historically been planned, built, and expanded have often intensified environmental pressures rather than alleviating them [1]. Intensive urban development, extensive impervious surfaces, and the systematic removal of natural elements have contributed to a range of negative impacts, including the urban heat island effect, increased frequency and intensity of urban flooding, and a significant loss of biodiversity [2], [3]. As climate-related risks become more frequent and more severe, urban nature has moved to the forefront of urban planning objectives and policy agendas, positioning itself as a critical component of sustainable urban development.

At the core of the contemporary discourse on urban nature lies the concept of green and blue infrastructure and the application of nature-based solutions. These approaches are increasingly recognised as the structural backbone of strategies and policies aimed at achieving resilient and sustainable cities. Grounded in ecological sciences, ecosystem-based urban planning acknowledges that integrating natural processes into urban systems is not optional but essential [4]. This paradigm offers cities the opportunity to evolve into healthier environments, not only for human populations but also for plant and animal species that share urban space.

Green infrastructure can be understood as a strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas, designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services while supporting biodiversity [5]. It operates across scales, connecting rural and urban landscapes, and contributes to climate adaptation, water management, and improved quality of life. Unlike single-purpose grey infrastructure, green infrastructure is inherently multifunctional. It can simultaneously address environmental, social, and economic challenges, making it a highly efficient and adaptable planning tool in the context of climate uncertainty [6].

Central to the value of green infrastructure is its ability to provide ecosystem services, defined as the benefits that nature delivers to people. These services are commonly categorised as provisioning services, such as food, clean air, water, and raw materials; regulating services, including climate regulation, water retention, nutrient cycling, pollination, and soil formation; and cultural services, such as opportunities for recreation, aesthetic enjoyment, and psychological well-being [7], [8]. Urban nature, when effectively planned and managed, can provide many of these services at the same time. This multifunctionality is one of the key strengths of green infrastructure and underlines the importance of urban nature as an indispensable component of contemporary cities.

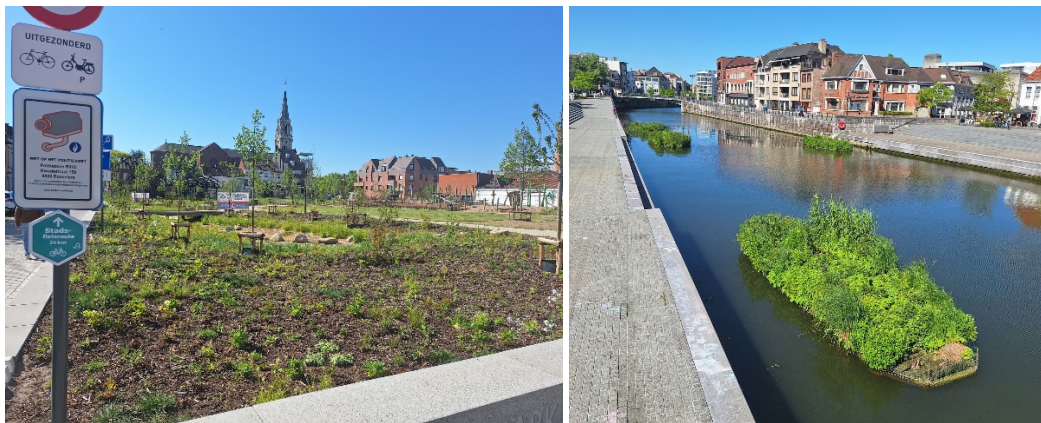


Figure 1. Left: A sustainable project in urban nature or blue-green development: Moermanpark Project in Roeselare, Belgium, as a new green area through urban renewal [9] (Author: B. Antonić).

Figure 2. Right: A sustainable project in urban nature or blue-green development: “green islands” as eco-friendly floating installations on the Lys River in Kortrijk (right) (Author: B. Antonić).

At the local level, during the implementation phase, urban nature is most often realised through nature-based solutions applied across different spatial scales. These interventions can range from the scale of individual building plots and urban blocks, through green street corridors, to larger systems such as urban wetlands and bioretention areas along rivers and waterfronts (Fig. 1-2). At the scale of the urban block, urban nature plays multiple roles. It contributes to microclimate regulation by reducing surface temperatures and providing shade, enhances urban biodiversity by

creating habitats and ecological niches, and improves both the functional and aesthetic qualities of public spaces.

The intended outcome of integrating urban nature at this scale is an increase in overall wellbeing of humans, but also other living species – urban flora and fauna. This includes improved physical and mental health for residents, stronger social interactions in high- quality public spaces, and more favourable living conditions for urban flora and fauna. In this sense,

urban nature is not merely an environmental add-on, but a foundational element in planning cities that are resilient, inclusive, and capable of adapting to the challenges posed by climate change.

The aforementioned challenges in the whole process of (re)developing and (re)shaping urban nature in cities can be easily noticed through real-life projects. One of them is the case of “URBACT Pioneer Accelerator – UPA” project in Niš, Serbia. The URBACT INTERREG programme of the European Union launched a special call, named as “URBACT Pioneer Accelerator”, for small-scale projects in the Western Balkan cities in early 2025, with the project duration of 18 months (URBACT, 2024-2025). Niš in Serbia is among the cities selected to implement it in the topic of urban nature. A specific of this URBACT call is its final step – a concrete pilot at local level. In the case of Niš, it is the regeneration of a small-scale green area in one multi-family residential block from socialist era, located in eastern Niš. The creation of the pilot is implemented through urban participation, which is a backbone of all URBACT projects. The aim of this paper is to explain the steps and dynamics of local participation in the UPA project in Niš, which a focus on local adaptations in working with different stakeholders and results from this process.

2. METHODOLOGY – CASE STUDY

This is a single-case study, where the case refers to citizen participation in the process of shaping a small-scale urban nature project in the city of Niš, Serbia. The paper is structured in this regard. The first step is already done, as a brief theoretical review, which is about (the importance of) urban nature. The next step is a focus on the case context: spatial, temporal, thematical (citizen participation), and institutional (URBACT project). Then, the case is elaborated, both textually and graphically. The end of the paper is about the expected results of the case study – a small pilot related to urban nature.

The case is urban participation process about refurbishing a small green area in Niš, the third city of Serbia, situated in the southern part of the country. This green area (‘pocket park’) is within a small multifamily neighbourhood in Branka Krsmanovića Street, in the eastern part of Niš (Fig. 3). The neighbourhood was built in the late 1970s, as the western section of the larger socialist ‘super-block’. It consists of six multifamily condominiums organised in two complexes of a “C” shape, which are designed to make the park a semi-closed green space from nearby streets. Although both the neighbourhood and its park are well maintained, they have not been refurbished since their construction almost 50 years ago (Fig 4). The residents of this neighbourhood are mixed by age, economical status, as well as the duration of their life in this place.



Figure 3. Left: The satellite image of the case – a small multifamily neighbourhood in Niš, Serbia (source: Google Earth).

Figure 4. Right: The current state of urban nature in the case-study neighbourhood in Niš (Author: B. AntoniĆ).

The explanation of the case study can not be completed without pointing out some inputs for citizen participation in (re)designing urban nature. Citizen participation in this field of urbanism is important, but how it should be implemented is still a challenging issue [10]. Moreover, sources

connecting these topics as equal ones – urban nature and citizen participation – are still rare. The main idea beyond this approach had to be the redistribution of power and responsibility for urban nature areas from central authority to citizens [10]. Usual approaches in citizen participation are their consultation and partnership in in-person forms, but combined participatory techniques (online + offline) are taking ground [11]. Some recommendations for this type of participation are: (a) fine alteration between phases which open for citizens and more directive; (b) the adaptation of the whole process to local context; and (c) the comparison with the other cases [12]. The future in citizen participation in urban nature projects and programmes is seen in nurturing citizen activism [11]. There inputs are critical to summarise the effectiveness of local participation in concluding remarks at the end of the research.

3. THE BASICS OF “URBACT PIONEER ACCELERATOR”

The institutional context is of a great importance for shaping the case study, i.e., to set up a model for local public participation; therefore, a separate section in the paper is dedicated for this. The project in Niš is implemented with the INTERREG URBACT Programme of the European Union (EU). Of 86 INTERREG programmes, just four are so-called interregional programmes, including the URBACT. This means that the URBACT includes the whole EU space, plus partner and accession countries, such as Serbia [13].

One of the main features of the URBACT is that it is mainly dedicated for local level – cities and city-level institutions – as partners in the URBACT networks. The main focus in this mean is the implementation of horizontal and vertical policy integration, i.e., the collaboration of local/city authorities with upper-levels (regional, national, EU) and multi-aspect sensitivity through environmental, economic, and social integration. This implementation is tailored as so-called ‘URBACT Method’, based a more inclusive and holistic approach. In practical sense, this is to develop sustainable urban strategies through co-creative process with local people [14]. Hence, the participatory planning and techniques are in the core of the URBACT.

The URBACT programme was opened for the participants from the Republic of Serbia, as well as other accession countries in the Western Balkans area, in 2023; therefore, this is relatively new EU programme for cooperation for the area, without previous local experience. This challenge was recognised and addressed as the URBACT Secretariat launched a special programme call for Western Balkans cities and municipalities – “URBACT Pioneer Accelerator” (UPA). The ‘special’ status of the UPA call was not related just to spatial coverage (THE Western Balkans), but also to the aim and structure of the projects and cities-participants. The aim of the UPA call is a learning process in which selected cities (a) adapt to understand EU urban development policies while (b) fostering innovation through (c) integrated and participatory approaches and (d) the implementation of small-scale pilot actions [15]. This had to be done during the 18-month duration of the UPA project, from April 1, 2025 to September 30, 2026.

The UPA Project does not rely on a usual approach in the URBACT in making project networks, but on four thematic clusters with separate topics: urban nature, mobility, sustainable tourism, and waste management. Each of 27 selected cities is positioned in one of the clusters. Niš is in the ‘urban nature’ cluster, together with Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Sarajevo, Dobo, Nikšić, Vinica, Zrenjanin, and Kragujevac. Regardless of the cluster, all 27 cities had to successfully pass through three learning dimensions in the project:

- EMBRACE: Training sessions, workshops and coaching to learn the URBACT Method and participatory planning;
- EXPLORE: In-depth study visits to leading EU cities;
- ACT: Locally organised Action Labs, in-person local workshops with stakeholders to ultimately co-design pilot project at local level.

The UPA Project is locally implemented by the four-member project team: a project manager, two local agents, and young intern. The team is supported by the URBACT experts. Each city has one local mentor to support them in local language and in local activities. Then, each cluster has its own thematic expert, while two leading experts are in charge for managing and coordinating the project of behalf of the URBACT Joint Secretariat. Finally, each city has their “core” stakeholders, known as an URBACT local group or, shortly, ULG.

4. URBAN PARTICIPATION FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION IN NIŠ

The city of Niš is selected in the “URBACT Pioneer Accelerator” call as one of 27 successful cities, including 10 from Serbia. The localisation of Niš in ‘urban nature’ cluster implies that the pilot as the final step in the project implementation is related to the (re)designing one small urban-nature area in Niš. This area was shortly described in the application. The local team is led by Ivana Miljanović, young intern is Nina Pejčić, while local mentor is Branislav Antonić.

The city of Niš completed two first phases – “Discover” and “Define” – in the first nine months of the UPA Project, by the end of 2025. The following section is focused on urban participation activities, while the other ones are mentioned in order to better illustrate the ‘project journey’.

The first “Discover” Phase was about defining the thematic scope of the project. It lasted from the start of the UPA Project (April 1, 2026) until the first milestone event in Ljubljana in the middle September 2026. This phase was, inter alia, dedicated for the preparations for all participatory activities. The introductory meeting of the project was in the City of Wrocław, Poland, during the URBACT City Festival, April 8-10, 2025. The UPA participants took part in all major sessions, including the presentation of good practice across Europe, study visits in the city, and cooperation options and learning. The first “inner” UPA workshop happened in Wrocław, where the representatives of the URBACT secretariat explained the basics of the UPA to all participants.

The next meeting was again in Poland, as Poland presided the EU Council during the first half of 2025. The city of Krakow hosted the Cities Forum 2025 from June 17 to June 19. This flagship event of the urban policy of the EU was a perfect location to deepen the knowledge and plans for the UPA Project. The UPA participants again had an opportunity to learn from the EU best practice and the city study visits. Again, the participants from the UPA projects had a separate meeting during the Krakow event.

Both in-person Polish events were to set up general rules and examples for the UPA cities. The first in-depth learning activity was online training for UPA participants, hold on July 3-4, 2026. Thematic experts were welcomed; then, they gave lectures on four cluster topics. In the case of urban nature, a thematic expert Kerri Farnsworth from Ireland introduced herself and gave lectures to the cluster city teams.

The first milestone event in Ljubljana in September 17-18, 2026 marked the end of the “Discover” Phase. Local experts were introduced at this event, as they had to support local activities in the UPA cities. The milestone event was mainly shaped to present and train the city teams about the different types and techniques for urban participation, such as a city safari, “Cities of tomorrow” article, “How Might We” challenge framing, etc.



Figure 5. Left: The first Action Lab in Niš, November 13, 2025 (Author: Niš URBACT team).

Figure 6. Right: An extract from the results of the e-survey for residents, conducted in late November 2025 (Author: Ivana Miljanović).

The Action Lab No 1 (i.e., stakeholder workshop) in Niš was organised on November 13, 2025. The lab was hold in a community place in central Niš. It was more dedicated to institutional stakeholders,

but also included the representatives of the case study neighbourhood. The meeting had three sessions: (1) the explanation of the basics of the UPA project and the urban nature cluster for stakeholders – Dr. Ivana Miljanović (Fig. 5); (2) the presentation of the essence and best practice of urban nature – Dr. Ivan Simić; and (3) an interactive workshop about the current assessment of the case (the pilot green area) by WOOLAP application – Dr. Branislav Antonić. Each session encouraged side-discussions, comments and proposals, so many useful information, planned to be collected later, was already noted in the first action lab.

After the action lab, the local team launched e-survey among the residents of the selected neighbourhood about their view on the current state of the green area, the patterns of its use and their first insights how it can be refurbished and upgraded. Behind understanding their opinion, the purpose of the e-survey was also to introduce the project and expected pilot to them and, indirectly, to initiate their active role in the future steps of the project. The survey was conducted in the late November 2025. In total, 84 residents responded on the survey (Fig. 6). The results of the survey show that local residents especially like urban greenery, shadow places, and cleanliness, while they are especially demotivated by broken urban furniture. They also prefer traditional urban design and the use of natural materials.

In the meaning, the project manager, Ivana Miljanović, participated in the two-day thematic exploration visit to the EU city, concretely, a visit to Utrecht, the Netherlands.

The Action Lab No 2 was held on December 9, 2025. It significantly differed from the first one. Even the venue was different – it was the local education centre close the selected neighbourhood and its green area. The target participants were the residents of the neighbourhood, whereas the other participants from the city institutions and NGO sector were also present. This action lab also consisted of three parts: (1) the first experience from the UPA project, including best practice taken from the Utrecht visit – Dr. Ivana Miljanović, (2) the presentation of small eco-urban design as an input for the pilot – Dr. Ivan Simić, and (3) an adjusted interactive workshop about the current assessment of the pilot by WOOLAP application – Dr. Branislav Antonić. Again, each session was followed by side-discussions, comments, and proposals (Fig. 7). However, they were especially valuable this time, as most of them were from local residents, i.e., the group who will be the main users of the refurbished green area in the neighbourhood.



Figure 7. Left: Stakeholders discussed the topic during the second Action Lab in Niš, December 9, 2025 (Author: Niš URBACT team).

Figure 8. Right: A city safari technique in the green area, the project pilot (Author: Niš URBACT team).

A city safari was organised on the same day, after the second action lab (Fig. 8). This participatory technique is an on-site exploration aiming to encourage a certain urban area alongside local stakeholders, who are a sort of guides. In the case of Niš, this activity had proven to be very useful as local residents as stakeholders were very active in informal conversations. Local residents were very keen in their explanations, so the city safari uncovered many diverse experiences. Thus, this participatory technique cemented the results from the e-survey and outdoor action lab discussions. The main additional value from the city safari in Niš was that local residents do not see the green area as one entity despite it is not a large space. In contrast, they differentiate central area for socialisation and peripheral parts to residential buildings as more private and more suitable for lush urban greenery.

All undertaken activities from the first two first phases (“Discover” and “Define”), which are described in this research, were documented by the local team in a so-called Dynamic Journal. It was completed by the end of 2025 and submitted as a key report for the first half of the project.

The next phase in the UPA Project is the 'Develop' Phase which is ongoing. The first joint online meeting was organised on January 23, 2026, to explain the phase direction and give general guidelines. Then, each city team and local expert had their own meeting – Ideation – to adapt the given guidelines to the local context and thematic cluster. In the case of Niš, the Ideation meeting was organised on February 5, 2026. The next or the third Action Lab or stakeholder workshop is scheduled for February 19, 2026, while the last one (the fourth Action Lab) is planned for late April-early May 2026. Then, the implementation of the pilot – the design and refurbishment of the green area – is planned during late spring and summer, so to be officially opened at the end of the UPA Project, in September 2026.

5. CONCLUSION

Instead of an ordinary conclusion, its first paragraph is an extract from the vision pitch, one of the UPA interim deliverables at the end of 2025. This document epitomises all given activities with the stakeholders' idea on how to create and redevelop the pilot-green area. The vision is to create a pocket park within the block with its own identity and purpose, incorporating the elements of (a) family corner, (b) a green-pocket garden with low-maintenance native plants, and (c) a lounge for the neighbourhood with shaded seating, pathways, and lighting for evening gatherings [16].

The vision pitch for the Branka Krsmanovića Street neighbourhood translates the theoretical principles of urban nature into a tangible, small-scale intervention that is inspired by everyday life of its residents. While the introduction frames urban nature as multifunctional green infrastructure delivering ecosystem services and enhancing resilience, the proposed network of pocket parks operationalises these concepts through spatially precise and socially responsive elements. The family corner, green pocket garden, and neighbourhood lounge collectively address microclimate regulation, biodiversity support, and social cohesion, thus embodying the ecological and cultural services discussed in theory. The emphasis on accessibility, inclusivity, and shared ownership reflects the participatory dimension of contemporary urban nature approaches. With the central aim of transforming underused spaces into interconnected green micro-environments, the vision demonstrates how theoretical principles can be effectively localised into a coherent, resident-driven model of sustainable urban regeneration in Niš.

Regarding to the topic of urban participation in Niš, it is important to compare undertaken activities and the explained inputs from theory. First, after the first stakeholder meeting, which was general and for city stakeholders, the participatory activities were redirected to local stakeholders. This is in line with the importance of involving such group, so to redistribute both power and responsibility for this urban nature area from central authority to them as the future users of the pilot-green area. Second, the UPA participation process combined both online and offline activities, i.e., both in-person workshops and e-survey and consultations. Plus, certain offline activities were hold outdoor. This is recommended as a suitable approach, to give dynamics to the whole process. Third, some activities were more directive as e-survey with closed and semi-closed questions, while all discussions during in-person workshops (Action Labs) were more open and flexible. Fourth, the whole process was adapted to both thematic cluster (urban nature) and local conditions in Niš; actually, the whole first phase ("Discover") was about this. Finally, the study visits of the members of the Niš team to European cities which are the best practice and showcases for the topic of urban nature and sustainable urban development were also critical to indirectly stimulate and nurture local ideas and proposals. The final goal of all these participatory activities is to make the pilot-green area as an integral space for local residents in both ecological and social way, as well as to develop their awareness about local urban nature and their willingness to maintain it as their own 'green microcosm'.

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