

## Exploring the social innovation co-production nexus in Sofia: The case of Toplocentrala within the AGORA project<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the territorial implications of social innovation and co-production of services in strategic spatial planning. It focuses on the regeneration of Toplocentrala, a socialist heritage building in Sofia that has been transformed into a regional centre for contemporary arts, within the context of the AGORA project's strategic planning process. The research aims to enhance our understanding of the role of public action in social innovation and the need to redefine collaborative practices within institutional frameworks to promote innovation. A multi-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data was employed, including site visits, interviews with key stakeholders, and secondary data analysis. The study highlights how strategic spatial planning processes involving social innovation and co-production of services can reshape the relationship between the state and civil society.

Questo studio si concentra sull'analisi delle implicazioni territoriali legate all'innovazione sociale e alla co-produzione di servizi all'interno della pianificazione spaziale strategica. L'attenzione è rivolta alla rigenerazione di Toplocentrala, un edificio di valore storico-socialista situato a Sofia, che è stato trasformato in un centro regionale per le arti contemporanee nell'ambito del processo di pianificazione strategica del progetto AGORA. L'obiettivo principale della ricerca è approfondire la comprensione del ruolo dell'intervento pubblico nell'innovazione sociale e la necessità di ridefinire le pratiche collaborative all'interno delle strutture istituzionali per promuovere l'innovazione. Per raggiungere tale obiettivo, è stato adottato un approccio multimetodologico che combina l'analisi di dati qualitativi e quantitativi, inclusi sopralluoghi sul campo, interviste con figure chiave e l'analisi di dati di seconda mano. Lo studio mette in luce come i processi di pianificazione spaziale strategica, che integrano l'innovazione sociale e la co-produzione di servizi, possano ridefinire la relazione tra lo Stato e la società civile in modo significativo.

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Mosquera Suarez has worked on the article's conceptualization, theoretical framework, methodology, interpretation and discussion of results. His involvement spans across all sections of this article. Giovanni Pagano contributed to the interpretation and discussion of results and has worked on the sections: Discussion and Conclusion; Elena Ostanel contributed with the initial theoretical framework and contributed to the following sections: Introduction, Towards a Nexus for Social Innovation and Co-Production, Methods and Conclusion.

The research was partly funded by the project 'Advanced cogeneration options for reintegrating local assets' (AGORA) under the 'Interreg Danube Region' programme, project number 353. The research lies on work carried out as project activities by MoS, SDA, Eutropian and other project partners.

**Keywords:** co-production of services; social innovation; strategic spatial planning

**Parole Chiave:** co-produzione di servizi; innovazione sociale; pianificazione territoriale strategica

## Introduction

The paper is aimed at investigating the intersection of social innovation and co-production in strategic planning, with an emphasis on their potential to empower and transform social relations, particularly between local institutions and community-based actions. In line with this position, the authors' aim is to reconsider the role of public action in social innovation processes and the need to redefine collaborative practices in order to foster innovation within institutional frameworks, as suggested by Ostanel and Pappalardo [2022]. In order to fulfil the objective of the research, the core question that is aimed to be discussed is to what extent and how social innovation and co-production of services generate change and contribute to modify the state-civil society relationship.

The research was carried out within the context of the EU-funded Interreg AGORA, which started in July 2020 and ended in December 2022. The objective of AGORA was to provide local authorities with policy instruments and expertise to revitalise vacant or underutilised areas and buildings<sup>2</sup>. As part of this effort, in the city of Sofia, the regeneration of the former heating plant of the National Palace of Culture built in 1981 into a modern European centre for contemporary art – Toplocentrala – represented the occasion for the beginning of a strategic

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<sup>2</sup> The AGORA project focused on strengthening the capabilities of Public Administrations (PAs) to effectively utilise local resources and facilitate adaptable, inclusive, and innovative approaches for physical and social revitalization in urban areas. AGORA primarily aimed to strengthen the ability of PAs to actively engage and empower diverse stakeholders in regenerating abandoned properties and unused land, regardless of their ownership status, through collaborative efforts of the public, private, and community sectors. Agora functioned at various levels of governance, including the city level, where it collaborated with the municipalities of Chisinau, Cluj-Napoca, Koprivnica, Kranj, Slavonski Brod, Sofia, Szarvas, and Zenica. Additionally, it operated at the regional level in Germany through the Neckar-Alb Regional Association, and at the district level in Prague, specifically in the 9th district (Prague 9). For more information: <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/agora>

planning process. Toplocentrala is particularly interesting as a bottom-up social innovation initiative led by independent artists to later become a public cultural institution. This case study – we argue – provides valuable insights into the evolving relationship between social innovation initiatives and local institutions over time, and can shed light on the social dynamics underlying such transformations.

The article begins by highlighting the potential of the nexus between social innovation and co-production in empowering citizens and shaping state-civil society relations, with a particular focus on strategic spatial planning. The following sections illustrate the approaches employed for the collection of data and its analysis, and an in-depth description of the case study. The last section aims to critically evaluate the strategic action of Toplocentrala and of the city of Sofia in relation to our research question.

### **Towards a nexus for Social Innovation and Co-Production**

In this paper, strategic spatial planning is considered as a process to rethink urban development through collaborative, public sector-led socio-spatial transformative and integrative processes (Healey *et al.*, 1997; Albrechts, 2006). As such, strategic spatial planning involves taking action to ensure that planning aligns with the broader, long-term goals for an area, but this includes collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders to develop specific plans and fostering social innovation (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2011).

In this view, co-production has been recognized as a fundamental principle that emphasises the participation and empowerment of various stakeholders in the planning process, especially those who may not typically be involved, such as marginalised groups (*Ibidem*). Albrechts (2013) presents co-production as an effective framework where non-state actors are not only 'involved' but can also initiate co-productive processes. This interpretation of co-production as a framework for collective action has been shaped by its evolution across various fields of study.

Watson (2014) argues that to differentiate co-production from other forms of state-society engagements that have been discussed in planning theory for many years, it is crucial to clarify the distinct meanings that the term has acquired in

different intellectual traditions. These meanings have evolved from state-initiated to social movement-initiated interpretations (*Ibidem*). While Ostrom sees co-production as a process of transforming «inputs from individuals who are not in the same organisation into goods and services» (Ostrom, 1996: 1073) through complementary forms of knowledge that can foster social capital and improve outcomes, Bovaird (2007) expresses concerns about its potential to dilute public accountability. On the other hand, Mitlin (2008) views co-production as a strategy used by citizen groups and social movements (particularly in the Global South) to seek engagement with the state to both achieve political objectives and the provision of basic needs. The various perspectives highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of co-production implications and its potential for shaping state-society engagements. Similarly, focusing on social space and socially innovative relations, Albrechts (2019) suggests an approach to strategic spatial planning which he considers *radical*, «a narrative of emancipation» (Ivi, 106), in which social innovation is interpreted as a collective agency in relation to the transformative practice of (radical) strategic planning.

However, we acknowledge that the term of social innovation is unclear due to its dynamic analytical status and its simplistic adoption as a buzzword in policy practices that have sought to rationalise the welfare state and commodify socio-cultural well-being (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, in works such as Godin (2012), it is possible to trace the origins of the term back to the 19th century, when social innovators were accused of overthrowing the established order, particularly property and capitalism; as well as in Chambon, David and Devevey (1982) the relationship between social innovation and societal changes is revealed in relation to how it can be accelerated by crises and recovery.

Owing to the latter analysis, MacCallum *et al.* (2009) have linked social innovation to the satisfaction of social needs, and societal change in relation to the role of the state. This territorialised perspective of social innovation particularly allows for the explanation of the relationships between the satisfaction of human needs on the one hand and social empowerment on the other, through the reproduction of community social relations (Van Dyck and Van den Broeck, 2013). Working from

this perspective, Moulaert *et al.* (2005) have reconstructed alternative models of local development from proximity projects that interpret social innovation in a multidimensional way, such as integrated neighbourhood actions, volunteer associations, workers' cooperatives, and housing associations. These are just a few of the forms in which social innovators contribute to local socio-economic development, in addition to responding to a social demand for services (*Ibidem*). A recent study by Tricarico, De Vidovich and Billi (2022) emphasises the significance of the territorial dimension of social innovation as a field of action that modifies spatial and social relationships to address social needs. Their assessment of social innovation literature indicates that a territorial perspective can help bring together knowledge from various actors and institutions to develop context-specific solutions for unique territorial contexts. Additionally, it can also be used as a means of co-production to develop policies that align with the interests of diverse actors, create public value, and foster social cohesion through bottom-up approaches. However, Tricarico, De Vidovich and Billi (2022) pointed out that its territorial implications with reference to the co-production of services are not adequately addressed.

Starting from these assumptions and building on some reflections recently published elsewhere (Ostanel, 2023), our analysis explores the relationship between social innovation and co-production in strategic spatial planning. Besides the territorialised perspective mentioned above, our work aligns with urban studies' perspective which considers social innovation as «a strategy and process not only to satisfy individual and collective needs abused by the market, but to strengthen the solidarity content of social relations between people involved in social innovation initiatives, as well as call up these relations as triggers of socio-political empowerment» (Moulaert and Van Den Broeck, 2018: 26)

The social innovation-co-production nexus within strategic spatial planning presented here suggests the possibility to empower citizens to shape their own future and produce a change in the kind of state-civil society relations. Through Toplocentrala, we argue that the AGORA project attempted to build a long-term vision for urban regeneration in Sofia. To this end, this research is designed and conducted to get a better

understanding of the role of public action in social innovation processes and to ascertain the need to redefine collaborative practices in order to foster innovation within institutional frameworks (Ostanel, 2023). The following section illustrates the modalities of our data collection and analysis before moving on to the description of our case study.

## Methods

The field research has been conducted using a multi-method approach and within the framework of the above mentioned AGORA project. More specifically, the work of the Municipality of Sofia (MoS), the Sofia Development Association<sup>3</sup> (SDA) has been studied through 'participant observation' (Spradley, 1980), site-visits and interviews have been conducted with the management team of Toplocentrala and representatives from the MoS and SDA<sup>4</sup>. This approach was coupled with a comprehensive analysis conducted within the AGORA project aimed to examine and evaluate the governance framework and decision-making processes, and the policy instruments and governance models of Sofia<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, we focused on the capacity building process of the MoS and came into contact with various bottom-up initiatives, including the re-claiming of a cultural space such as Toplocentrala. Our interest lies particularly in the interaction between Toplocentrala and MoS. Through AGORA, we observed the regeneration process, participated in key stakeholders' meetings, and conducted interviews with key civil society stakeholders<sup>6</sup> to gain insights into Sofia's artistic collectives.

<sup>3</sup> A non-profit organisation founded by the MoS in order to establish an ongoing dialogue with the civil society, creative communities, business, and academic institutions.

<sup>4</sup> Part of the research team had the opportunity to be engaged in participant observation being involved in the AGORA Project working for Eutropan, an organisation involved in the implementation of AGORA Project.

<sup>5</sup> The study was conducted by the Urban Institute of the Republic of Slovenia as a deliverable for the AGORA project, 'Deliverable D.T1.2.3 Study reports on the state of the art in AGORA cities'.

<sup>6</sup> The interviews took place primarily during a meeting of the AGORA project consortium in May 2022. The individuals interviewed were as follows: Veselin Dimov, who is currently the director of Toplocentrala and previously an activist of the 'Toplocentrala Association'; Sevdalina Voynova, the director of the Sofia Development Association; Atanas Maev, a local stakeholder and former activist of the 'Toplocentrala Association', now serving as the Chief Executive Officer at Derida Dance Center and Derida Stage; Ivelina Kyuchukova, the director of

Finally, as a result of the AGORA's conclusion, we have also developed a reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) to generate new knowledge from the project.

## Results

AGORA corresponds to the kind of strategic spatial planning introduced by Oostrlynk *et al.* (2011) where the need for providing socially and ecologically sustainable spatial development is addressed by combining a strong action oriented approach with a sensitivity to the multiplicity of actors involved. The following sections discuss two elements that characterise the AGORA project as a strategic planning process: the socio-spatial process led by the public sector and the co-production of the strategic spatial project called Toplocentrala. The first aspect focuses on developing visions, coherent actions, and implementation strategies, while the second aspect aims to effectively bring about change aligned with the objectives of the strategic planning process.

### *AGORA as a strategic spatial planning process*

As said before, AGORA aimed to equip ten local authorities in the Danube Region with solutions and the experience to activate local space potential in vacant or underused areas. This was done through a capacity building process to share knowledge regarding inclusive and empowering urban regeneration processes among project partners and through the implementation of specific actions to test the generated knowledge.

Given the prevalence of abandoned socialist heritage buildings in Sofia, the MoS faces a pressing need to revitalise the built environment in alignment with more contemporary developments. Indeed, AGORA focused on the restoration and reuse of existing structures to preserve the city's historic buildings by giving them a new purpose. The MoS recognizes the significance of revitalising underutilised public spaces, whether open or built, in Sofia. This is especially important considering the city's thriving cultural scene and the cultural and creative

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the Krasno Selo' Municipal Cultural Institute House of Culture and 'Culture Expert' for the Municipality of Sofia. Lastly, in November 2022, we conducted an interview with Vladia Mihaylova, the chief curator of Toplocentrala.

industries sector, which contribute to 8% of Sofia's economy. These spaces would serve as essential social, educational, and cultural service centres, addressing the lack of dedicated facilities for these sectors. A solution which is closely tied to Sofia's profile as the largest Bulgarian city, experiencing a demographic growth, particularly among young and well-educated citizens. To this end, AGORA adopted a Quadruple-Helix approach (Schütz, Heidingsfelder and Schraudner, 2019) to reach greater public involvement and democratise knowledge in innovation processes in order to engage the governmental, research, business, and civil society sectors. Within this approach, AGORA adopted the concepts of 'co-creation', to which we refer here as «the involvement of citizens in the (co)-initiator or co-design level» of public services (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2014: 15), and co-production meant as «the involvement of citizens in the (co-)implementation of public services» (Ivi). In addition to this approach, AGORA organised its various actions at the local level by implementing a set of measures representing the four tracks of strategic planning (Albrechts and Van Den Broeck, 2004): (i) the construction of a vision, (ii) the activation of immediate actions, (iii) stakeholder involvement, and (iv) achieving public opinion.

The MoSandSDA implemented a series of actions using the AGORA framework and the approaches mentioned above. These actions included a city walk to introduce the Toplocentrala site to local stakeholders, the establishment of a local 'AGORA community' consisting of various actors such as cross-departmental task forces, investors, landowners, young professionals, and service providers. Additionally, co-creation workshops were held to develop an 'Urban Regeneration Agenda' (URA)<sup>7</sup>, a long-term vision aimed at identifying and repurposing unused spaces in the city. Co-design workshops were also conducted to plan the regeneration of the area surrounding Toplocentrala and the adjacent Perlovska river, along with the refurbishment of an abandoned open-air stage in St. Troitsa Park. In more detail, the implementation of a series of co-creation workshops to develop Sofia's URA, along with the establishment of a local 'AGORA community', aimed to construct a vision, involve stakeholders,

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<sup>7</sup> The final document can be found at: [www.sofia-da.eu/images/resources/D.13.1.5-Sofia-URBAN\\_REGENERATION\\_AGENDA-f.pdf](http://www.sofia-da.eu/images/resources/D.13.1.5-Sofia-URBAN_REGENERATION_AGENDA-f.pdf)

and gather public opinion in line with the four axes of spatial planning outlined above. The first workshop focused on mapping and prioritising untapped opportunities for the creative reuse and activation of underused spaces in Sofia. During this phase, participants highlighted the need for multifunctional open-air stages for cultural and recreational activities. In the second workshop, participants reviewed the ideas generated in the first workshop and discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the city's cultural operators. The objective was to explore co-designed governance instruments that could unlock and enhance the utilisation of underused public and private spaces. Various support solutions were proposed, including an interactive map/matchmaking platform and guaranteed minimum support grants for cultural operators. The third workshop centred around strategy development and finalising co-design actions. Building on the knowledge generated in the previous meetings, the Urban Regeneration Agenda, prepared by SDA and MoS, was presented for discussion. Within this final workshop, participants deliberated on balanced regeneration, equitable support for public and private art operators, incentives for networking and partnerships, municipal support for marketing and promotion, and evaluation indicators for the URA. Key lessons learned from the workshops included the recognition of the need for flexible and diverse means of support beyond grants and financial assistance. The importance of exchanging experiences with other cities and municipalities was also emphasised.

*Toplocentrala: AGORA's strategic action*

Initially erected between 1982-1986 as a heating plant for the – at that time – new and iconic National Palace of Culture, the municipally-owned building of Toplocentrala is composed of three blocks covering a surface of 1.200 sqm within a lot of 5.869 sqm located in Sofia's South Park. In 2014, during a Plenary Meeting of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), the largest worldwide network for performing arts, an independent group of artists from Sofia expressed the need for more performing arts spaces in the city. This meeting resulted in a request made by local artists to the MoS for the regeneration of the former Palace of Cultures' heating plant. Sofia's Mayor accepted the request and supported

the initiative in a special moment where Sofia was a candidate for European Capital of Culture 2019. A simple and formal support that did not lead in the short term to any physical regeneration of the space until an international architectural competition was launched in 2017 for its redesign. In the same period, however, a number of private investors expressed interest in the same space, and they simultaneously brought up their ideas about how to repurpose it. This interest put the initiative in danger. As a reaction, a media campaign was launched by several artists to pressure the MoS to keep its word. Within this campaign, the same group of artists formed the Toplocentrala Association. IETM and other international networks such as Trans Europe Halles (TEH), and Bulgarian European Parliament politicians supported this campaign. As soon as this initial moment of tension passed, the regeneration process continued along the path initially envisioned by the activists.

As a result of this process, in the summer of 2021, a Decree of the Ministry of Culture established Toplocentrala as a new Regional Centre for Contemporary Arts, the first of its kind, a new cultural public artistic institution with a multilevel governance, a cooperation between the national government (the Ministry of Culture), the local government (MoS) and grassroots independent artistic scene. The objective of Toplocentrala is to apply a bottom-up approach where a close cooperation between local authorities and civil society allows participation in the programming of cultural activities.

The establishment of this new cultural public artistic institution has had an impact on the actors who were previously involved in the Toplocentrala Association. Some members of the association have now taken on roles within the management of the new institution, aligning themselves with the institutional side and becoming part of the administrative machinery. For instance, Vesselin Dimov, who was previously one of the key figures in the association, is now serving as the managing director. On the other hand, certain members have chosen not to join the institutionalisation of Toplocentrala but instead continue their work as cultural producers. They view Toplocentrala as an opportunity to showcase their work. In this sense, they will remain involved in Toplocentrala's activities, participating through co-programming of events, open calls, and other

collaborative means. It must be noted finally that the idea behind Toplocentrala is to bring the necessary infrastructure into the context, creating better conditions for the development of the independent community of artists with an on-site production office, permanent consulting, a functioning residency program, and regular educational activities (EAIPA, 2021).

AGORA has contributed to the regeneration process of Toplocentrala by focusing on two key objectives and areas of work. Firstly, SDA and MoS efforts aimed to ensure that the programming and activities carried out by Toplocentrala, have a meaningful impact on the city and appeal to a diverse range of citizens. Secondly, AGORA has emphasised the significance of the relationship between Toplocentrala and its surrounding context. This is crucial to prevent the space from becoming isolated, especially considering its location within a city park near Sofia's centre which is surrounded by main roads.

As a result, Toplocentrala effectively meets the needs of young artists and the independent art scene by providing dedicated spaces for rehearsals and performances, along with essential technical equipment and qualified staff. This support facilitates the creation of new artistic products, creating economic opportunities for self-expression and cultural production among young artists. Additionally, the project offers comprehensive education on the artistic production process and improves access to cultural content for aspiring professionals in various artistic fields.

Furthermore, Toplocentrala contributes to the contemporary art scene by providing increased financial and administrative support, thereby enhancing the quality of artistic production. It also promotes social and economic inclusion through a ticketing system that considers individuals' economic backgrounds and abilities. Discounts are provided for disadvantaged groups, vulnerable populations, youth, and the elderly.

In addition to its artistic endeavours, Toplocentrala also plays a role in preserving Sofia's cultural heritage. It combines this preservation with an architectural design that adheres to European standards for eco-friendly and sustainable structures. Through collaboration with the SDA and The Rivers of Sofia Association, Toplocentrala carried out an intervention

at the Perlovska River. The aim of this intervention was to clean the river bank and establish a new open-air river beach for the residents and visitors of Sofia. By doing so, the project raises ecological awareness and encourages its target groups to value, care for, and invest in the environment collectively.

Toplocentrala creates a unique venue for engaging with nature, art, and leisure activities, contributing to the well-being and overall quality of life for local communities in the neighbourhood. Moreover, the project has an international impact, fostering connections with numerous international artists, cultural operators, managers, and their respective cultural products and educational initiatives. Hence, it strengthens Sofia's international image as a welcoming, diverse, and art-supportive destination.

## **Discussion**

This section aims to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the AGORA process and its strategic action, Toplocentrala, in relation to our research question, which focuses on analysing the extent to which the social innovation-co-production nexus has transformed the state-civil society relationship.

### *Discussing AGORA*

Our analysis starts by situating AGORA within the broader context of collaborative policy processes that have been pursued by the city of Sofia in recent years. Through this contextualization, we gain insight into AGORA's alignment with a set of recent policy instruments developed by Sofia with the aim of developing long-term visions in a participatory manner. 'Vision for Sofia' for example, adopted in 2020 is a long-term urban planning strategy developed by the MoS in a participatory way<sup>8</sup>. The goal is to create a shared and sustainable vision for the development of the city and suburban areas until 2050. The project involved over 10,000 direct participants from various sectors, including

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8 'Vision for Sofia' is an initiative of Sofia Municipality to create a shared and long-term strategy for the development of the capital and suburban areas until 2050. The project has the ambition to analyse the current state of Sofia and propose specific steps, measures and goals for future sustainable development of the city. For more information: (<https://vizia.sofia.bg/vision-sofia-2050/>).

citizens, businesses, NGOs, and administration. The process included over 400 interdisciplinary meetings and involved a multi-disciplinary team of experts from different fields. The 'Vision for Sofia' team has formulated 24 long-term goals, nearly 250 steps, and 385 specific measures. Similarly, 'Sofia Chooses', a program adopted in October 2020, aims to provide meaningful citizen digital participation in urban planning and regeneration<sup>9</sup>. The program allows citizens to propose and select urban improvement projects via online voting, and the winning projects were implemented with a budget of 1.5 million BGN (750,000 Euro) for 2021. The first three projects with the biggest popular support were announced in December 2020 and implemented in 2021. Sofia's shift towards greater citizen engagement in planning can be attributed to a transformation from a top-down and technocratic post-communist planning system to more open and participatory approaches. In the past, decision-making in Bulgaria followed a rigid power structure, with state-driven efforts driving the development of land and real estate (Hirt, 2005). This resulted in a centralised and technocratic approach to planning. Despite the increased ability of citizens to influence government planning and decision-making, there was no clear break from the past in terms of planning processes. This remained true until the early 2000s, even as interactions between planners and citizens increased. In this context, there was limited evidence indicating that the involvement of citizens had a significant beneficial impact on the planning and decision-making or was deemed essential (Ivi, 2019).

Since the city of Sofia has already adopted novel approaches to citizen engagement through other strategic and participatory processes, AGORA represents an additional endeavour aimed at transforming conventional planning systems. In Sofia, AGORA involved a diverse set of local stakeholders, including NGOs, SMEs, community representatives, and universities, who engaged in a co-creation process to ideate, discuss, and

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<sup>9</sup> 'Sofia Chooses' is a program initiated by the Municipality of Sofia, which focuses on enhancing the urban environment through the implementation of projects proposed by citizens. These projects are selected by the public through voting, with the aim of promoting the direct involvement of non-governmental organisations, professional groups, and citizens in the allocation of the municipal budget. For more information: (<https://www.sofia.bg/en/sofia-izbira>)

select relevant infrastructure and projects for future strategic actions. This participatory approach employed both co-creation and coproduction to refer to collaboration between citizens and governments in the design and delivery of public services (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2014). Such an effort towards engagement at different scales can be seen as a significant symbolic action to promote a normative integration process between prevailing values and advancements in public institutions, as well as those in society as a whole (*Ibidem*). While AGORA seeks to produce positive transformations in urban and cultural regeneration, a more comprehensive examination of Toplocentrala, and its interrelation with the AGORA project, is necessary to fully comprehend the nature and extent of the changes in the state-civil society nexus within the broad strategic spatial process.

### *Discussing Toplocentrala*

Toplocentrala is a public entity that was established as a result of a social innovation initiative that collaborated with local institutions to regenerate a post-industrial space. The involvement of translocal connections (Avelino *et al.*, 2020) played a pivotal role in this process, as it empowered individuals by providing access to resources and creating a sense of belonging, impact, meaningfulness, and resilience. Notably, the support of international networks proved instrumental when the initiative led by a group of independent artists faced the potential threat from private investors in 2017. The increased media attention attracted through these networks bolstered the artists' cause and enabled them to exert greater pressure on the MoS. Since 2018, Toplocentrala has been an active member of the TEH network, largely due to the efforts of its current artistic director, Vesselin Dimov, who fostered strong ties with international cultural networks throughout the regeneration process. Likewise, the AGORA project, functioning as an international endeavour focused on urban regeneration and planning, significantly contributed to empowering the community of artists and cultural practitioners, equipping them with the necessary knowledge, tools, and authority to actively engage in formulating a new vision for the revitalization of the neglected socialist heritage and to make decisions that shape the development of Sofia.

The finalisation of Toplocentrala within the AGORA project has resulted in a significant enhancement of citizen participation in determining the cultural and spatial requirements of the area, thus empowering local actors in the planning process. This initiative has given citizens a greater voice, contrary to the traditional planning practices in the country (Hirt, 2005). Through Toplocentrala, a unique form of public infrastructure has been established, characterised by the active involvement of residents in the governance of a public institution through the co-programming of cultural activities. The overarching goal of Toplocentrala to employ a bottom-up approach, emphasising close cooperation between local authorities and civil society, ensures that the activities programmed by Toplocentrala align with and cater to the specific cultural needs of the local community. Hence, we can observe how, like other projects that operate at the intersection of urban regeneration and cultural development, Toplocentrala attempted to generate political and social meanings which are rooted in their specific context, and felt by their inhabitants, through its activities. Consequently, Toplocentrala avoids the risk of justifying gentrification and captures the attention of people who aren't interested in art, as suggested by Baraldi and Salone (2022:14). Finally, we can observe how, by operating at the intersection between social innovation, cultural policy, regional/territorial development, and cultural and creative enterprises, Toplocentrala acts as a «platform Space» (Tricarico, Jones and Daldanise, 2020), a conceptual model for Cultural and Creative Enterprises (CCEs). As such, in Toplocentrala, social innovation plays a vital role in fostering community engagement and facilitating cooperative relationships between diverse stakeholders, ensuring their interests are in line with the goals of territorial development. The importance of Toplocentrala's collaborative approach lies in the recognition of the value of creating a new institution, responsive to local actors and cultural needs, and that above all is public. As said, the MoS has involved many initiators of the 'Toplocentrala Association' in the new management board of the cultural centre. In this sense, since the activism of the former association is now incorporated in the public cultural venue, this case provides evidence for the concept of «museum activism» (Janes and Sandell, 2019) where cultural institutions aim to

bring about change within the organisation itself. Moreover, Toplocentrala serves as a driver for change in the Bulgarian artistic community and the city of Sofia. It promotes the work of young artists through open calls and collaborations with international artists, which represents an innovation in the Bulgarian context. Within our research, the role of Toplocentrala as a new public institution has been identified by the members of the 'Toplocentrala Association' and other stakeholders as the most important result of the process implying a change in the governance of culture towards more open and participatory forms supported by the public sector.

#### *Limitations and suggestions for further research*

A limitation of the study could be the authors' closer involvement with the institutional part of the process, MoS and SDA. Nevertheless, the researchers sought to mitigate this by conducting interviews, site visits and desk research of Toplocentrala. The analysis of the data collected tells the story of the function of Toplocentrala, the role of AGORA and other transnational networks, the co-creation process for regeneration, the actual management scheme, and the relevance of this project for a vast number of stakeholders. More research into the role of the cultural sector within Toplocentrala's regeneration, by taking advantage of the scheme proposed by Evans (2005) could increase our knowledge of how Toplocentrala's combines both the culture-led regeneration – an action focusing on the physical regeneration, on the creation of a public facility as a catalyst for local development – and a cultural regeneration model in which a cultural activity is fully integrated into an area strategy alongside other activities in the environmental, social and economic sphere. Such research could contribute to the enhancement of existing underused environmental and historical cultural assets in conjunction with the arts and cultural activities that promote local creative ecosystems and encourage collaborations between diverse sectors.

#### **Conclusion**

The case presented here highlights how strategic spatial planning processes that involve social innovation and co-production of services can bring about changes in the relationship between the

state and civil society. Specifically, the case of Sofia exemplifies how the integration of the Toplocentrala regeneration process and AGORA as a strategic planning process encompasses the following key aspects. Firstly, the MoS adopted a co-creation approach by organising public sessions facilitated by the SDA. The objective was to collaboratively establish a common and shared vision for the revitalization of socialist heritage for cultural purposes. The co-creation process of the URA has resulted in a stronger engagement between the MoS and Sofia's citizens, with the aim of regenerating historical heritage into new cultural assets. This process sought to stimulate and systematise social innovation initiatives by utilising local community knowledge and recognizing grassroots resources to develop a new strategy for territorial development. As highlighted by Balducci (2004), this approach emphasises the importance of leveraging community resources and knowledge to foster territorial development.

Secondly, the implementation of the new public institution, Toplocentrala, introduced a multilevel governance framework that fostered interactions among actors from the central state, local authorities, and the local cultural sector. Through this multilevel governance, MoS seeks to ensure that Toplocentrala activities have a meaningful impact and cater to the diverse needs of its citizens. Furthermore, the establishment of Toplocentrala as a new institution facilitates the integration of this innovative collaborative approach into the administrative apparatus. Consequently, it influences the advancement of future projects. Notably, Toplocentrala has already become a national benchmark, serving as a foundation upon which other initiatives can build to bring about transformative change.

Additionally, a key finding of this research is the inclusion of activists from the 'Toplocentrala Association' in the administrative machinery. By bringing their activism into the institutions, there have been attempts to change the cultural governance for contemporary arts in Sofia. This development is significant given the current focus on more collaborative approaches and establishing ongoing dialogues with civil society, creative communities, businesses, and academic institutions, by the MoS with the support of the SDA. However, the success of Toplocentrala's integration within the public sector raises critical questions regarding their participation, motivation,

and long-term sustainability. The success of such initiatives cannot be defined once and for all but rather requires ongoing negotiation. While some may argue that such integration aims to mainstream and neutralise the innovative contribution of civil society groups, in the case of Toplocentrala, it has led to the acceptance of their demands for a new way of producing and conceiving culture at various administrative levels.

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