ALEKSANDRA BAJDE

BRIDGING CULTURAL POLICY AND PRACTICE: YOUTH CULTURAL AGENCY AND ECOLOGICAL IMAGINARIES IN SERBIA AND SLOVENIA

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Jelena Vasiljević

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Author:
Aleksandra Bajde

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Bridging Cultural Policy and Practice: Youth Cultural Agency and Ecological Imaginaries in Serbia and Slovenia

From Policy Ambition to Practice: The Core Gap

Ecological transition has been increasingly prioritized by the European Union (EU) cultural policy over the last decade. Key EU policy initiatives and programs, such as Creative Europe, the European Green Deal, and the New European Bauhaus, position sustainability as a structural priority shaping funding mechanisms, institutional strategies, and modes of cultural production, rather than merely a thematic concern (European Commission, 2019, 2021). The EU Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026 (Council of the European Union, 2022) further operationalizes this orientation by integrating sustainability into policy priorities and coordinated actions. Most recently, the *Culture Compass for Europe* (European Commission, 2025) has deepened this commitment, explicitly positioning culture as a driver of ecological transition, democratic resilience, and social cohesion.

Although culture remains a complementary competence of the EU under the principle of subsidiarity (Consolidated ver-

sion of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, 2012, Art. 167), these frameworks significantly shape national cultural ecosystems. Their influence is most obvious in the working conditions for artists, including access to funding, project design, and existing forms of collaboration. In Slovenia, an EU Member State, these frameworks operate more directly through program participation, funding structures, and policy alignment, reflecting their structural embedding within Europeanisation processes. In Serbia, a candidate country, they unfold more indirectly through policy diffusion, transnational cooperation, and partial integration into EU cultural programs.

Despite growing emphasis on policy, a gap remains between strategic frameworks and artistic practice. Cultural policy is organized around measurable outputs, project-based timelines, and compliance-driven criteria, whereas artistic practice often engages ecological questions through relational, experiential, and process-based modes of inquiry. As a result, policy and practice frequently evolve in parallel rather than in sustained, productive dialogue. This produces a structural misalignment: policy frameworks articulate ambitions for sustainability, participation, and eco-social transformation, while artistic practices generate situated, materially grounded responses that do not readily translate into existing policy categories or evaluation criteria (Belfiore, 2004).

This research examines how young cultural practitioners in Slovenia and Serbia engage with ecological imaginaries in artistic practice. It also explores how the relationship between cultural policy and practice might be better understood and more effectively aligned, raising a central question: How do young cultural practitioners in Serbia and Slovenia engage with and enact ecological imaginaries through artistic practice, and what does this reveal about the relationship between cultural policy and practice?

The concept of ecological imaginaries enables an examination of how ecological and democratic relations, alternatives, and horizons of social transformation are envisioned, experienced, and made culturally and politically meaningful through artistic practice.

Conceptual Framework

This research falls at the intersection of three fields: youth agency and cultural production, ecological and democratic imaginaries in artistic practice, and governance and participation. Young cultural practitioners are approached as active agents of meaning-making, rather than as passive reflections of existing social conditions. Artistic practice is understood as a fundamentally social and relational process, embedded within institutional, material, and political environments and forming part of broader systems of production, governance, and everyday life.

Ecology is taken more broadly – it is not merely an environmental or policy matter but a relational, social, and material condition that permeates infrastructures, institutions, and lived experience. This conception is inseparable from questions of governance: funding regimes, institutional structures, and policy instruments shape the conditions that facilitate artistic work and determine which forms of expression are enabled, constrained, or marginalized (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008).

Drawing on Erić (2025), artistic practice can be framed as a horizontal, solidarity-based exchange of knowledge, capable of fostering collaborative and non-hierarchical forms of organization. Erić further emphasizes the role of art as a catalyst for reflecting on and transforming eco-social relations, particularly in contexts marked by crisis, inequality, and structural instability. Across the findings, this framework is evident in the ways artists build informal networks, generate ecological knowledge through participation, and position cultural practice as a form of collective inquiry rather than individual expression.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design that combines document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and case study analysis. The empirical component is based on 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with Serbian and Slovenian artists, cultural workers, curators, and researchers, including cultural practitioners from both countries based abroad. The study focuses on young cultural practitioners in early to mid-career stages, predominantly between 28 and 35 years

of age, whose work engages ecological and/or democratic questions. A limited number of additional cases were included where analytically relevant. Interviews were conducted in person and online in February and March 2026, primarily in English, with two conducted in Slovenian. All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed, and coded. Interview data are cited using anonymized identifiers (e.g., Interview 1, 2026).

In addition to the interviews, the study examines a selection of artistic case studies drawn from the interviewees' own practices and from projects identified through their recommendations. These cases are analyzed as context-specific forms of ecological and democratic inquiry and span a range of artistic approaches, including music and sound art, film and moving image, performance and theatre, digital and multimedia practices, and participatory and interdisciplinary formats.

Slovenia and Serbia offer a particularly productive comparison given their shared regional context – both formerly part of socialist Yugoslavia – and their differing degrees of integration into EU cultural policy frameworks. This contrast allows the study to assess how proximity to EU governance structures shapes the conditions and forms of ecological and democratic artistic engagement.

Comparative Cultural Governance

The comparison between Slovenia and Serbia reveals significant differences in cultural governance, funding structures, and policy orientations (see Table below). Slovenia operates within an EU-aligned governance framework, which positions culture as a societal subsystem contributing to democratic development and sustainability. The Resolution on the National Program for Culture 2022–2029 [Resolucija o nacionalnem programu za kulturo 2022–2029] (Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022) explicitly integrates sustainability through references to cultural landscapes, the circular economy, and low-carbon transition. Public funding is comparatively stable and linked to EU cohesion and recovery mechanisms.

Serbia, by contrast, frames culture primarily as a national project tied to identity, heritage, and the cohesion of the cultural space according to the Strategy for the Development of Culture

of the Republic of Serbia 2020–2029 [Strategija razvoja kulture Republike Srbije 2020–2029] (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). Ecological sustainability remains comparatively peripheral and is not developed as a transversal principle. Funding structures are fragmented and project-based, and public investment remains significantly lower – 0.67% of the national budget in 2025 – compared to Slovenia's approximately 1.59% (Asociacija, 2025; Vreme, 2024). These differences are systemic, shaping both the possibilities and the constraints of artistic engagement with ecological and democratic issues.

Table

Comparative Overview of Cultural Governance Dimensions in Serbia and Slovenia

Dimension	Serbia (Strategy 2020–2029)	Slovenia (ReNPK 2022–2029)
Strategic framing	Culture as national priority and unity of cultural space	Culture as societal subsystem shaping an inclusive, sustainably oriented democracy
Governance model	Strategy and action plan; acknowledges limited public debate practices	National program and government action plan; clearer system criteria
Ecology / sustainability	Largely peripheral; appears mainly in heritage and EU-related contexts	Explicit integration through cultural landscape, circular economy, and low-carbon transition
Participation	Participation stated as a goal; weaker deliberative mechanisms	Emphasis on pluralism, inclusive access, and freedom of expression
Cultural labor	Recognition of precarity, but fewer structural mechanisms	More detailed regulation of self-employed status and social contributions
EU alignment	Focus on Creative Europe, mobility, and promotion	Structurally embedded in EU cohesion and recovery frameworks

Dimension	Serbia (Strategy 2020–2029)	Slovenia (ReNPK 2022–2029)
Funding logic	Fragmented project funding; emphasis on evaluation	Greater emphasis on stable financing and infrastructure investment
Public cultural funding	0.68% (2024) / 0.67% (2025)	1.49% (2024) / 1.59% (2025)

Note. The table provides a comparative overview of key cultural governance dimensions in Serbia and Slovenia, including strategic framing, ecology and sustainability, funding logic, EU alignment, and levels of public cultural funding, based on national cultural strategies and policy documents (Asociacija, 2025; Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022; Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia, 2020; Vreme, 2024).

Findings

Serbia: Material Ecology, Institutional Precarity, and Cultural Agency under Constraint

The cultural field in Serbia is marked by institutional precarity, fragmented governance, and limited public investment. In this context, ecological and democratic imaginaries emerge as materially grounded and politically charged forms of cultural practice. Unlike in Slovenia, these dynamics take shape within a governance environment that is only partially aligned with EU cultural policy frameworks. As outlined above, Serbia's cultural governance framework foregrounds identity and heritage, while ecological sustainability remains marginal and is not developed as a transversal principle.

Ecological concerns are consistently rooted in everyday experience, particularly pollution, industrial degradation, and uneven environmental infrastructures, rather than in policy discourse or global sustainability agendas (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 7, 2026). Composer Sara Stevanović's composition *I Thought God Can Be Found in the Danube* renders ecological interdependence sonically, drawing on the Danube as a transnational ecological system and foregrounding tensions between environmental pro-

cesses that exceed national borders and governance structures that remain nationally bounded (Interviews 1, 3, 2026). Film director Stefan Đorđević's film *Wind, Talk to Me*, set in the industrial landscape of Bor, situates ecology within intimate experience – exploring memory, grief, and bodily vulnerability – framing contamination as an ambient condition of life rather than an external problem (Interviews 2, 5, 2026). Across the cases, ecological imaginaries emerge as materially grounded, historically conditioned, and relational forms of inquiry, shaped by situated, lived realities instead of policy frameworks.

Institutional precarity shapes all dimensions of cultural production. Irregular funding, low public investment, inadequate infrastructure, and dependence on transnational networks all affect its operating conditions (Interviews 2, 3, 6, 2026). Precarity functions not only as a material constraint but also as an epistemic one, limiting the capacity for sustained reflection and broader inquiry (Interview 5, 2026). The 2025 theatre production *Madame Olga*, a co-production of the National Theatre in Belgrade and the National Theatre of the Republic of Srpska, illustrates how institutional ambivalence, political influence, and governance instability generate self-censorship and reshape artistic production under governance pressures (Interviews 3, 4, 2026). Artists respond through adaptive strategies: working in alternative spaces, employing indirect forms of critique, and building informal collaborative networks (Interview 4, 2026).

Democratic engagement is largely decoupled from formal institutions and instead enacted through cultural practice and collective organization. Composer Jug Marković's work *#itis-time* transforms protest into artistic expression, framing cultural participation as political action (Interview 6, 2026). While the independent sector[1] is highly dynamic and innovative, it remains structurally marginalized and reliant on unpaid labor and asymmetrical transnational collaboration (Interviews 1, 5, 7, 2026). Mobility provides access to external resources but often reproduc-

[1] The term *independent cultural sector* refers to cultural actors, organizations, and initiatives that operate autonomously from direct political control. Independence in this context concerns governance and decision-making rather than funding structure; actors within the independent sector may therefore be publicly funded while maintaining artistic and organizational autonomy.

es rather than alleviates structural inequalities, reinforcing the Serbia–Slovenia asymmetry within European cultural systems (Interview 7, 2026).

Overall, artistic practice in Serbia serves as a site for ecological and democratic knowledge production amid systemic constraints. In contrast to Slovenia, where institutional alignment coexists with structural tensions, the central challenge in Serbia is one of structural absence: a fundamental misalignment between policy frameworks and artistic practice, driven by limited and fragmented public investment, governance instability, and weak institutional capacity.

Slovenia: Relational Ecology, Institutional Alignment, and Structural Ambivalence

The cultural field in Slovenia is comparatively well-institutionalized and closely aligned with EU sustainability frameworks, yet it remains marked by persistent tensions. The Resolution on the National Program for Culture 2022–2029 (Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022) explicitly integrates sustainability as a strategic priority, referencing cultural landscapes, the circular economy, and low-carbon transition. However, these frameworks are not simply implemented in practice; they are reconfigured into relational, systemic, and process-based modes of inquiry that frequently exceed policy categories (Interviews 8–14, 2026).

Ecology is consistently understood as a framework permeating artistic thinking, production, and perception rather than a separate thematic concern. Žiga Divjak's theater project Gejm / The Game examines ecological relations through interdependencies among bodies, infrastructures, and governance systems, highlighting the EU border regime as an ecological system that governs mobility, life, and exclusion. The multimedia project Ex Topia by the art duo PlateauResidue articulates ecological knowledge through embodied, place-based, and participatory processes rather than representation. It is an ecological inquiry enacted through practice, not communicated through it (Interviews 9, 13, 2026).

Across further cases, ecology serves as an analytical lens: Visual artist Sara Bezovšek's net-based and computational work

investigates how digital and algorithmic systems shape environmental perception — extending ecological thinking beyond the natural into the technological domain (Interview 9, 2026). Visual artist Ajda Kadunc's site-specific installation Trespassers (2025) uses biodegradable materials including mycelium, wax, wood, and clay to explore spatial boundaries and multispecies relations, conceiving landscape as a shared field of human and non-human presence in which every gesture carries ecological consequence (Praznik, 2025). Visual artist Ana Likar's long-term research project Myriad Tentacles Will Be Needed Again and Again situates ecological systems within institutional and archival structures, tracing what she terms an ecology of invisibility — the conditions under which certain forms of knowledge, labor, and life become imperceptible within institutional frameworks (Likar, 2021). Composer and guitarist Mihael Hrustelj's sound compositions build hybrid sonic environments from natural soundscapes and repurposed urban and natural materials, exploring the entanglements between ecological and technological systems and the ways in which listening itself can become a form of ecological attention (Interview 14, 2026). Visual artist Lara Reichmann's spatial installation Disposable Bodies traces the erasure of human — and historically female — labor within technological and computational systems, framing the absorption of bodies into data processes as both an ecological and political condition of hyper-production (Ravnikar Gallery Space, 2024).

Tensions emerge most acutely around the institutionalization of sustainability. Interviewees acknowledge its growing role in funding structures but express skepticism toward its reduction to formalized – and at times disproportionate – requirements in application and evaluation processes. Such proceduralizing risks prioritizing compliance over impact, reducing sustainability to standardized criteria in funding applications, and leaving underlying structural factors unaddressed (Interviews 8–14, 2026).

Interviewees further describe an incentive structure in which projects framed as ecological or sustainable are more likely to receive support. This encourages strategic alignment with funding priorities and, at times, the instrumental use of ecological language without corresponding changes to under-

lying production conditions (Interviews 8, 9, 10, 2026). One interviewee questions the proportionality of these expectations, noting that the cultural sector's environmental impact remains comparatively low relative to other sectors (Interview 14, 2026). Another emphasizes that the ecological crisis cannot be addressed through individual gestures alone but must be understood as embedded in broader economic and political systems (Interview 12, 2026).

There is a recurring tension between sustainability goals and the mobility requirements of artistic production, particularly touring and transnational collaboration, which remain structurally embedded in cultural practice and are only partially addressed within existing policy frameworks (Interview 12, 2026). Touring and transnational collaboration thus serve as both prerequisites for professional sustainability and sources of environmental impact.

Interviewees point to the structural unsustainability of current production models, characterized by pressure for continuous output and short-term project cycles, and call for slower, more durational practices (Interviews 8, 9, 11, 14, 2026). Meaningful ecological engagement, they argue, cannot be compressed into rapid production cycles.

Precarity in Slovenia thus manifests not as absence but as acceleration: short-term project cycles and structural constraints on long-term inquiry. Lara Reichmann's spatial installation Disposable Bodies reflects these systemic conditions, particularly the invisibility of labor and the entanglement of human bodies within technological and data-driven systems, highlighting the broader ecological and material implications of contemporary cultural production.

Democratic imaginaries emerge through relational and experimental artistic forms rather than formal institutional engagement. Democracy is understood less as representation than as a field of relations requiring continuous negotiation, as explored through Divjak's exposure of governance-produced exclusion, Bezovšek's analysis of digital publics, Kadunc's multispecies relational ethics, and Hrustelj's emphasis on listening and co-presence as conditions for collective engagement (Interviews 8–14, 2026).

Overall, the Slovenian case reveals a persistent tension between strong policy alignment and the structural conditions of artistic production, with funding structures and production logics often remaining misaligned with the temporalities and practices they seek to support. In contrast to Serbia, where ecological imaginaries are grounded in material conditions and institutional absence, Slovenia demonstrates more mediated, reflexive, and systemic forms of ecological thinking, without this necessarily translating into a greater capacity for transformation.

Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis reveals two distinct cultural governance environments that nonetheless produce a shared set of structural tensions. In Serbia, ecological imaginaries emerge from lived material conditions – pollution, extractive industries, environmental degradation – and democratic imaginaries are enacted through informal networks, collective practices, and protest-related cultural production. In Slovenia, ecological imaginaries are more mediated, systemic, and reflexive, reflecting a context in which ecological discourse is already institutionalized within cultural policy, yet where institutional alignment produces its own tensions through instrumentalization and unsustainable production logics.

In both contexts, a shared misalignment exists: cultural policy tends to operate through measurable outcomes and project-based funding, while artistic practice unfolds through long-term, process-based, and relational modes of inquiry that resist such evaluation. In Serbia, this takes the form of institutional absence; in Slovenia, institutional ambivalence. In both cases, artistic practice constitutes a significant site of eco-democratic knowledge production, yet its transformative potential remains constrained by systemic conditions that require sustained policy intervention.

Policy Recommendations

Serbia: From Institutional Precarity to Stability

Policy intervention must address the systemic factors that shape cultural production rather than focusing on isolated measures.

1. Establish transparent and independent funding mechanisms with multi-annual cycles that ensure long-term stability, reduce reliance on short-term project cycles, and provide the institutional prerequisites for sustained artistic work (Interviews 1–3, 5–7, 2026).
2. Strengthen institutional autonomy through transparent appointment procedures, professionalized management, and safeguards against political interference and institutional capture within cultural institutions (Interviews 2–4, 2026).
3. Recognize and support the independent cultural sector through targeted funding schemes and inclusion of independent actors in policy processes (Interviews 1, 5, 7, 2026).
4. Support process-based and non-instrumental artistic practices through funding frameworks that recognize artistic research, long-term inquiry, and qualitative value creation (Interviews 1, 4, 7, 2026).
5. Foster cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary collaboration between cultural, scientific, and environmental sectors, supporting hybrid practice and knowledge exchange.
6. Strengthen regional and transnational networks and improve equitable access to European funding frameworks for practitioners from candidate countries (Interviews 5–7, 2026).
7. Address broader governance conditions – including corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and political interference at the systemic level – that function as structural prerequisites for durable cultural policy change (Interviews 3, 6, 2026).

Slovenia: From Policy Alignment to Substantive Sustainability

The key challenge is not the absence of policy frameworks, but their partial misalignment with the realities of artistic practice.

1. Move from short-term project cycles to multi-year funding and extended project timelines of at least three years to enable sustained artistic inquiry (Interviews 8, 9, 11, 14, 2026).
2. Shift from formalized sustainability criteria to systemic sustainability, prioritizing structural factors – mobility systems, production infrastructure, and labor conditions – rather than standardized criteria in funding applications (Interviews 10, 11, 13, 2026).
3. Support artistic research and process-based practices by developing evaluation criteria that reflect the temporalities and outputs of long-term, exploratory work (Interviews 9, 11, 13, 14, 2026).
4. Avoid the instrumentalization of ecological themes by supporting context-specific, critically grounded, and formally experimental practices rather than prescriptive thematic priorities.
5. Strengthen dialogue between policy and practice through regular, structured platforms for exchange and the systematic inclusion of practitioners in policy design and evaluation.
6. Foster interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration by supporting art–science partnerships and sustained engagement across cultural, scientific, and environmental sectors.
7. Address the tension between sustainability goals and mobility requirements by developing policy approaches that acknowledge and structurally manage this contradiction, rather than shifting responsibility onto individual practitioners.

Conclusion

This policy brief has examined how young cultural practitioners in Serbia and Slovenia engage with and enact ecological imaginaries through artistic practice, along with the implications for the relationship between cultural policy and practice. The comparative analysis shows that artistic responses to ecological transition are profoundly shaped by institutional contexts, funding structures, and broader political conditions. At the same time, artistic practice actively reworks these conditions, producing forms of ecological and democratic knowledge that exceed existing policy categories.

A key finding is that young cultural practitioners are not merely beneficiaries of cultural policy but also agents who actively shape ecological imaginaries and the wider social and political meanings they carry. Their work renders ecological relations perceptible, critiques dominant systems of organization, and creates opportunities for alternative modes of coexistence to be sensed, tested, and negotiated. Artistic practice thus constitutes a significant site of eco-democratic knowledge production, contributing not only to cultural expression but also to broader processes of social reflection and collective future-making.

If ecological transition is to be meaningfully integrated into cultural governance, sustainability cannot remain limited to strategic rhetoric, thematic priorities, or formal criteria in funding applications. It must be addressed at the level of institutional structures: funding models, temporal frameworks, infrastructural support, and institutional autonomy. More broadly, culture should be understood as a constitutive dimension of ecological transition rather than a secondary or illustrative one. Young artists and cultural practitioners do not simply communicate sustainability agendas developed elsewhere; they actively shape how ecological relations, conflicts, and alternatives are imagined, contested, and made socially salient. Recognizing and supporting this role is essential if cultural policy is to move beyond symbolic commitment toward genuine eco-social transformation.

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Interview List

Interview 1 (2026). Serbian composer and sound artist. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 2 (2026). Serbian researcher and former curator. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 3 (2026). Serbian filmmaker and photographer.

Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 4 (2026). Serbian theatre director. Interview conducted in February 2026.
Interview 5 (2026). Serbian interdisciplinary artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 6 (2026). Serbian composer. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 7 (2026). Serbian artist and curator. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 8 (2026). Slovenian interdisciplinary artist. Interview conducted in February 2026.

Interview 9 (2026). Slovenian visual and digital artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 10 (2026). Slovenian visual artist. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 11 (2026). Slovenian visual artist working in painting and installation. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 12 (2026). Slovenian theatre director. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 13 (2026). Slovenian artist–research duo. Interview conducted in March 2026.

Interview 14 (2026). Slovenian musician and composer. Interview conducted in March 2026.

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