

The Battle For Belgrade

Article by Dobrica Veselinović

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Belgrade's urban megaproject, a planned huge waterfront project, has caused mobilisations and protests, not least due to forced evictions, violations, and dubious behaviour from state officials. It represents a model of globalised urban development that emergent citizens' movements have shown is not the only solution.

But let us stop for a little, and look at how everything started.

The Belgrade Waterfront Project was first presented in 2012 during a local election campaign when Aleksandar Vučić (now president of Serbia) was a candidate for mayor of Belgrade. Although he lost that election he had a big come back in the next election campaign in 2014 after which he formed a government with the Serbian Progressive Party which gradually took the city of Belgrade under their control. In the media, the project was presented as a visionary attempt to turn the devastated and neglected – but very promising – waterfront in central Belgrade into a two-million square metre commercial complex, complete with hotels, office buildings, luxury apartments for 17,000 people, the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, and a Dubai-style 200-metre tower. The project attempted to impose a new identity on a city whose identity has been forged for centuries. It was promoted as a ticket out of a crisis in a country in which thousands of people are without a permanent housing solution, where the number of people below the poverty line is increasing daily, and in a city with numerous ghost shopping venues and stores, even in Belgrade's central shopping and commercial spaces.

The master plan for the two-million square metre area was bought by the investor, the Eagle Hills Company from Abu Dhabi, a recently established real estate firm based in the United Arab Emirates. It is a spin-off company created for the purpose of creating this and several similar projects in third world countries with a financial plan based on equity and debt financing without property that could serve as a guarantee. It was announced that the investor would invest 3.5 billion dollars. The obligation of the investor would be to construct commercial and housing objects, but no guarantees of this have been provided. In contrast, the Serbian state has obliged itself to provide infrastructure for the entire area and to provide the utility services needed for the start of construction, as well as to lease to the private investor more than 100 hectares of the most valuable and buildable land in Belgrade.

This was impossible to implement whilst respecting the Belgrade urban plans, legislation, and laws. Therefore, exceeding its authority and legally unauthorised to do so, the Serbian government declared the project to be of 'national significance'. Although the nature of this significance was never explained to the public, the project was legalised to go on the fast track. Instead of changing the investor's proposal so as to comply with the city's recognised needs and the long-term planned development path, urban plans and laws were rapidly changed. The city of Belgrade amended the city planning documents so as to suit the needs of the corporate partner from UAE, breaching several dozen of its own laws and regulations. The supposed urgency to sign the deal with the investor was given as an excuse to rush

things and to implement the 'Lex Specialis' – the 'exceptional law', to evict the hundreds of families living on the site, many of them left without a permanent housing solution.

As a reaction to this process, the initiative 'Ne da(vi)mo Beograd' (or 'Don't Let Belgrade D(ri)own^[1]') was formed in 2014 with the goal of preventing the plunder and further degradation of Belgrade in the name of colossal urban and architectural projects. The initiative brought together individuals and organisations primarily interested in urban and cultural policy, sustainable city development, fair use of common resources, and the involvement of citizens in urban development. The core team consists of around 30 individuals from different backgrounds, and it tries to be as open as possible to new people and collaborations.

One of the landmark moments for the movement occurred on the election night of the 24th April 2016, when a group of about thirty masked men entered the Savamala district where the Belgrade Waterfront was planned and, armed with baseball bats and heavy equipment, demolished multiple buildings that stood where the project was meant to be built. The masked men also apprehended people who worked in that area, tied up night guards, confiscated mobile phones, and prevented passers-by from moving through the area. The citizens called the police and tried reporting what was happening, but the police did not react and redirected them to the Communal Police, who also refused to show up. The day after, and in the following days, both state officials and the media remained silent about the incident. A couple of days later the Ombudsman published a report about the demolitions. According to the report, on 25th April, at around 2am, an organised, equipped, motorised, and masked group of people had taken control over a part of neighbourhood of Savamala. The freedom of movement of people in the vicinity was constrained, and their personal belongings, including mobile phones, were illegally confiscated. In two hours, the entire street was torn down. The audio recordings of conversations eventually provided by the police indicated that many citizens had tried to report what was happening. President Aleksandar Vučić later admitted that city officials had been behind this event.

Because of this, the initiative organised a series of street demonstrations, each of them gathering from ten to thirty thousand citizens who, through collective walks through the centre of Belgrade, demanded accountability for the inaction of the police officials and the resignation of the implicated city leaders (particularly Mayor Siniša Mali), as well as for better freedom of media and expression.



Marko Rupena, Kamerades

On the other hand, the events around this case show us what is most important to know for future. They are proof of a much more serious trend – a trend of reducing the space for democratic actions and organising in the public sphere.

We will try to sum up several patterns of response from the state and the governing parties to the critiques and demonstrations, but we will also offer several, primarily tactical and strategic, visions of possible further actions.

They who control the media, control public opinion

At the moment, a struggle over control of the narrative is taking place in Serbia. The narrative is created in the public space primarily through the parameters set in the sphere of the media. In the previous decades, Serbian authorities have used different means (pressure, privatisation, investments by the people close to the leading party, etc.) to take control of a number of private media and, alongside this, have undermined the role of publicly owned media companies. In other words, the lack of any kind of programme critical to the government – apart from satirical shows – in the mainstream media is obvious; there is no polemical content. These cleansed communication channels are therefore used by the state for transmitting their messages to the public.

This is unambiguously demonstrated in emergency press conferences organised by government representatives where only so-called ‘friendly’ media are allowed to ask questions and who then send messages to the public several times a day.

Another supporting element is a wide range of tabloids and weekly magazines that

supposedly 'leak' information about the government and stir hysteria about certain events. It is likely that this is the government testing the waters of public opinion before making an official announcement.

In this recent period, especially during the election campaign, another front line for shaping the public opinion emerged – a well-organised and centralised 'astroturfing' campaign (astroturfing meaning disguising a political campaign and making it look like it comes from the public whereas it has been disguised by the state or by private actors). The aim was to produce a large number of 'independent' comments on social media and in media portals either supporting the government or critical of anti-government news. A huge number of people are often engaged in such 'astroturfing' campaigns. Through sophisticated platforms and by investing significant assets, they try to reshape public opinion.

This trend is increasingly common on social networks as fake pages and profiles are created, similar to real ones similar to the ones being faked are made. In this way, confusion is used to discredit the opposing party.

They who control the public space, control the city

An additional element in the method of reducing the space for civil activism and action are the repercussions that may be seen in the public space that is increasingly privatised and in which the citizens are actually losing certain rights. Observing the character of those local – and at the same time globalised – urban changes, there is the clear development of a paradigm that wants to define a new identity of the city, away from old models of socialist-era centralised urban planning and in keeping with liberal processes of regional and global integration. These attempts at creating a new image of the city that fits global market conditions is redefining urban physiognomy with the aim of increasing the attractiveness of the city and enabling its participation in global competitions to attract financial capital. In such circumstances, the needs of locals are usually neglected. On the other side, due to the ineffectiveness of the contemporary models of urban politics since the nineties, citizens have had to try to independently solve their own needs, to gain individual freedoms, and to establish a specific type of collective in their local community. For example, through building housing or infrastructure that they needed informally, and therefore illegally, but which was then normalised/accepted.

There are many possible solutions to such a situation. In my opinion, they are based around the following three pillars:

Free public space – if we start from the idea that a city should be available to everyone and that its citizens should participate in and decide on the direction of its development, then public space is one of the most visible arenas for democratic battles.

Public space may indeed become the space for debate and gatherings only if we the citizens manage it and use it again. This means an unambiguous and strong resistance to the commercialisation of space by different private-public partnerships and to the violation of the natural environment, as well as a nurturing of the culture of the public space. This request is strategic, it always has to be the top priority and we always have to refer back to it again and again.

Conquering and claiming space for independent expression – a tactical move for bringing the public space back to the public is conquering and establishing ‘niches’ for testing new management and decision-making models. Space conquering may be in the form of advocating for independent spaces for culture, squatting, or community gardens, and alternative local economic models.

The importance of such spaces is the incubation of ideas; each social group that wants power in a society must conquer its own spaces.

Local communities – “For the purpose of achieving the general, common and everyday needs of the determined local population, the citizens may found local community or other form of local self-government (borough, quarter) in conformity with the law and the statute.” Serbian law therefore contains the idea that municipalities should delegate the governing process to the lowest possible level, but this isn’t implemented. If we manage to establish in the future new methods and mechanisms for the operation of this almost-forgotten idea, maybe we will succeed in reversing the apathy and inciting the active participation of citizens in the processes that concern them the most.

Making a new ideological framework in which different struggles for public goods (such as education, public space, utility companies, public services...) are connected will help establish alliances within the existing civil society organisations and to unite with traditional civil society actors, such as trade unions, and cooperate with single-issue and grassroots informal initiatives.

One tactic might be to establish a platform for cooperation between organisations in the field of media and investigative journalism and organisations that deal with legal protection for press or media actors, a platform which would result in a continued and comprehensive analysis of cases which would highlight the anomalies of our societies.

To conclude by going back to the beginning of this story: the Belgrade Waterfront project exemplifies unabashed corporate power and a lack of democratic accountability. The deal between the corporate partner, a firm from United Arab Emirates, and the Serbian government, backed by a strong parliamentary majority, suspends public interest and public involvement in the decision-making for the sake of private interest. In order to meet corporate needs, the government and the city authorities introduced massive changes to urban planning legislation, and their promised obligations will plunge Belgrade and Serbia into huge debt. The whole deal is contrary to Serbian legislation and procedures and it does not take into an account the needs of the society, or the economic urban reality.

However, there is no sign of a surrender from activists on the horizon. The night of the demolition was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the trampling on the public interest done in the name of the project, which proved to be the final straw for many Serbians. Today, more than three years after the Waterfront project has been introduced and a year and a half after the night demolition showed the project’s true nature, a new sense of hope can be felt on the streets of Belgrade. It is the strength of citizens willing and ready to take back control over their city, their lives, and their future.

In the end, after more than three years of intense campaigning against the Belgrade Waterfront project – which included almost all available tactics, from writing objections to

urban plans to confrontational street actions, mass protests, lawsuits, complaints – the Initiative *Don't let Belgrade d(r)own* is turning towards politics. The previous period has shown that civil and public pressure to alter the nature of the city's development, did not bear fruit. This locally specific movement which has rallied around the notion of the 'right to the city' is now entering a new phase – the stage of preparations for local elections in Belgrade that follow in 2018.

[1] The name is an untranslatable Serbian word game playing with the phrases: "We do not give Belgrade" and "Do not sink Belgrade".

[2] <https://www.belgradewaterfront.com>



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