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URBAN IDENTITY OF BELGRADE: PERFECT CHAOS, IMPERFECT BALANCE

Urbani identitet Beograda: Savršeni haos, nesavršena ravnoteža

ABSTRACT: *Using a typology of urban symbolism, the identity of Belgrade is reconstructed on the basis of accounts by a sample of city residents, foreigners and locals, who work in international companies and organizations. The component of behavioral symbolism is found to prevail, referring to the place's atmosphere, mood, spirit, or energy. Next comes material symbolism, particularly in relation to Belgrade's location at the confluence of two rivers, and the Kalemegdan complex overlooking it. All other types of symbolism are much less prominent. Belgrade is described as having a comparatively low global visibility and lacking a readily recognizable landmark. What emerges as a pervasive motif in the different symbolic codes is the attribute of contradiction, and the related qualities of hybridity, liminality, and incompleteness.*

KEY WORDS: *Belgrade, urban identity, urban symbolism, contradiction*

APSTRAKT: *U radu se, uz pomoć tipologije urbanih simbola, identitet Beograda rekonstruiše na osnovu iskaza uzorka njegovih stanovnika (stranaca i građana Srbije) koji rade u međunarodnim kompanijama i organizacijama. U karakterizacijama dominira bihevioralni simbolizam, koji se odnosi na atmosferu, raspoloženje, duh ili energiju grada. Na drugom mestu je materijalni simbolizam, naročito u vidu geografskog položaja Beograda na ušću dveju reka, uz kompleks Beogradske tvrđave koji se nad njima uzdiže. Svi drugi tipovi simbola su znatno slabije prisutni. Ispitanici smatraju da je Beograd relativno slabo vidljiv u globalnim razmerama i da mu nedostaje opštepoznato obeležje koje bi nepogrešivo simbolizovalo. Uočljivo je da se kroz različite simboličke izražajne jezike provlači motiv protivrečnosti, kao i s njime povezani atributi hibridnosti, liminalnosti i nedovršenosti.*

KLJUČNE REČI: *Beograd, urbani identitet, urbani simbolizam, protivrečnost*

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Introduction

The identity of Belgrade – what characterizes it and makes it different from any other place – has often been a topic of reflection, in academic research, literature and daily life. Thus, in asking what Belgrade „is“ today, we build upon a long line of inquiry.

Yet, curiously, the perspective of a culturally informed urban sociology has not been very prominent, and it is this gap we wish to partly fill. Belgrade's identity, as a social and cultural phenomenon and research subject in its own right, has received comparatively little systematic treatment in sociology. Belgrade has more often been approached with structurally framed outlooks, focusing on issues such as government, economy, town planning and architecture, provision of social services, historical and institutional development, population change etc., than in terms of cultural constructions and symbolic interpretation.

Literary renditions of Belgrade, on the other hand, have often combined fiction with cultural and historical commentary, or even proto-sociological analysis: from the foundational „view from Kalemegdan“ of Vladimir Velmar-Janković (2002 [1938]), the harrowing picture of interwar Belgrade in Boško Tokin's autobiographically inspired *Terazije* (2015 [1932]), and Branislav Nušić's (2014) stories of „old Belgrade“, to post-World War II hommages such as the well-liked writings of Momo Kapor or Duško Radović's aphorisms, to the latest novel by Dragan Velikić (2019).³

Within the social sciences and humanities, Belgrade's identity has been studied by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, art historians and critics, architecture theorists, and others. Among the more recent studies, we may cite generalist sociological accounts of Belgrade's development (Vujović 1997, 2004, 2014), semiotic and anthropological readings of Belgrade as text (Radović 2013, 2014) or as lived/imagined space (Živković 2011: 15–41; Ristivojević 2014; Aksić 2017), and social and cultural histories (Marković 1992, 1996; Norris 2009; Stojanović 2008; Vučetić 2018; for New Belgrade, see Blagojević 2007, Backović 2010). The city's architectural heritage has been superbly rendered in Slobodan Bogunović's *Architectural Encyclopaedia of 19th and 20th Century Belgrade* (2005).

In addition, a number of scholarly journals have recently devoted special issues to related topics: for example, *Limes Plus* on the identity of Belgrade in a historical perspective (1–2/2012) and on foreigners in Belgrade (2/2013), while *Kultura* has had issues on the cultural identity of cities (122–123/2009) including a study of Belgrade by Bojana Bursać (2009), and a critical history of public spaces in Belgrade (154/2017). Yet, the approach taken here, aiming at delineating the identity of Belgrade in most general terms, and focusing on its symbolic substance and more or less shared cultural constructions, has actually been relatively uncommon.

3 Manić (2012) offers a sociological perspective on depictions of post-war transformations of Belgrade in Serbian literary fiction. A wealth of texts, photographs and other memorabilia about historical Belgrade can be found at a website devoted to „old Belgrade“, <http://www.staribeograd.com/>.

Data and method

In this paper⁴ the urban identity of Belgrade is reconstructed by analyzing qualitative empirical data. The evidence consists of interviews with people living in Belgrade, foreigners and locals, who engage regularly in transnational interactions and interchanges. The data have been collected within the study „Territorialization of transnational discourses and practices in Belgrade”, as part of the wider project „Territorial Capital in Serbia – Structural and Action Potential of Local Development“ conducted by the Institute for Sociological Research of the Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, which broadly aimed at gauging the import of specific local resources for urban development in different Serbian regions. The Belgrade study focused on the Serbian capital and sought to situate it within a global framework: to what extent, and in what sense, is Belgrade a global city?

The sample comprises 42 persons – 21 foreign nationals who have lived in Belgrade for at least a year, and 21 locals (Serbian citizens, permanent residents of Belgrade).⁵ All are college-educated professionals, working in establishments such enterprises, non-governmental or international organizations, educational institutions, or diplomatic missions, where they engage in intercultural contact on a daily basis.⁶ The interviewees have been located through snowball sampling.

The method of data collection is semi-structured person-to-person interviews. They were conducted in late 2018 and early 2019, in Belgrade, at locations of the respondents’ own choosing, most often coffee shops. Audio recordings have been transcribed, and these transcriptions comprise the dataset on which our analysis is based. The language of interviews was Serbian for Serbian nationals and English for foreigners, except for six of them who also wished to talk in Serbian, which implies sufficient language skills that enable them to engage in daily conversations with the local population.⁷

The interview schedule broadly addressed four thematic areas: living in Belgrade, overall impression of Belgrade, exchange of knowledge, and plans to leave. Questions about Belgrade’s identity and symbols were asked within the second section. In reconstructing the identity of Belgrade⁸ we have focused primarily on the following schedule items:

- Bearing in mind your (direct or indirect) familiarity with other (European) cities of a similar size – what sets Belgrade apart (in positive or negative terms), what makes it recognizable?

4 The paper is part of the project “Challenges of New Social Integration in Serbia – Concepts and Actors“ (179035).

5 Interviewees born in other parts of the former Yugoslavia have been listed as locals, because they share the language and in most cases have lived in Belgrade since childhood or teenage years.

6 An equal number of women and men were included (21:21). The Serbian subsample was slightly younger (ages 24–51) than the foreign one (27–71), though in both groups the bulk of respondents were in their late twenties to early forties at the time of interviewing.

7 Quotes from Serbian-language interviews in this paper have been translated by the authors.

8 We leave aside the global aspect, dealt with by Mina Petrović in her contribution to this Special Section (2020).

- What are the symbols of Belgrade in your opinion?
- What do you think is Belgrade's brand?

A separate question concerned ideas and judgments on the city's inhabitants:

- What do you think of Belgrade people, are they somehow specific?

which, for foreign interviewees, was followed by:

- Before coming here, did you have any idea about people living in Belgrade, and if yes, what kind of ideas?

Additionally, answers to other interview questions have also been used to outline a richer and more nuanced picture of Belgrade's identity (such as: If you encouraged your friends to visit Belgrade as tourists, what would you recommend them to visit? Generally, what would you single out as the most positive side to living in Belgrade, and what is the most negative? Should Belgrade look up to and try to emulate some other city/cities, in some respects?).

Theoretical tools: a typology of urban symbolism

In order to analyze the distinctiveness and symbols of Belgrade, we employ the typology of urban symbolism we already used in a study of medium-sized cities in Serbia (Spasić, Backović, 2017). It is based on the writings of urban anthropologist Peter Nas and his associates (Nas, 1998; Nas, Jaffe, Samuels, 2006; Nas, De Groot, Schut, 2011) who, starting from the premise that urban symbols are crucial for a city's identity, take up a variety of urban „symbol bearers“ and look into how different cities play with, and are played by, various types of dominant and secondary symbols that mark them, in the eyes of inhabitants and outsiders alike, and thus define what these cities „are“. Nas' typology distinguishes between material, discursive, iconic, behavioral and emotional symbols.

Seeking a closer fit with the Serbian material, our own model (for more details see Spasić, Backović 2017) departs from Nas et al. in several respects, but retains the fundamental idea that symbols are major building blocks for constructing a city's identity, both as a lived reality, for lay actors, and in analytic terms, for the researcher. Hence, we posit seven types of urban symbolism: *material, discursive, personal, behavioral, emotional, gastronomic* and *sign*.

Material symbolism consists of the material urban configuration in relation to the natural environment, and includes city architecture in general (neighborhoods, specific streets, historical center, city layout, skyline), particular structures (monuments, iconic buildings, religious and secular shrines, archaeological sites), and the interrelation between natural and built habitat – both the way the city is embedded in its natural surroundings, and the presence of nature within the city (parks, gardens).

Discursive symbolism refers to the stories about the city and its (re)presentations: in official communications, tourist guide books, works of art (cinema, literature, painting), popular culture, as well as in mass media, maps, TV shows, billboards, logos. For some cities, there exists a prior entrenched stereotypical image, of town

or its region, expressed through popular jokes, anecdotes, characteristic folk heroes etc. Here we also place references to characteristic traits of local mentalities, which overlaps with behavioral-type symbolism.

Personal symbolism („iconic“ in Nas) is manifested in city’s identification through famous people associated with it, whether by birth or important creative periods spent in place: artists (painters, writers, actors), athletes, or prominent politicians from past or present.

Behavioral symbolism concerns the patterns of collective behavior: public celebrations, manifestations, festivals, fairs, as well as other more routine, structured patterns of behavior that take place in the city and help make it distinctive (rituals, ceremonies, holidays, demonstrations). Secondly, behavioral symbolism involves the activity characteristic of and traditionally highly developed and widespread in a particular city.

The final category proposed by Nas and associates and assimilated into our own model is *emotional* symbolism, denoting the feelings, primarily of inhabitants but outsiders as well, towards the city as a whole or any of its various elements. Like in discursive symbolism, there are two levels here: emotional symbolism can be taken as a transversal dimension present in all other symbol types, because each can be experienced with different emotions, or as a category in its own right, coming forward especially when negative feelings are strong.

In addition to (modified) categories of Nas and colleagues, we complemented the typology with two new ones. Our sixth type is *gastronomic* symbolism, for cases where food features prominently in urban identities: typical foodstuffs, dishes or drinks that have become firmly associated with a city and play a part in defining it. This proved to be a necessary addition when studying Serbian data, given the centrality of food for Serbian collective self-identification – the „stories Serbs tell themselves (and others) about themselves“ (Živković 2011: 4) – particularly in comparison with Western nations.

Finally, the seventh type is *sign* symbolism which is about abstract symbols that operate as „signs“ for a given city. This apparently tautological type can indeed be considered separately because it is the one most saturated with symbolization: materiality of the objects in this case retreats before signification. Instances may involve literal city *signs* (a flag, a coat of arms, a founding charter), or what we call *localized markers* – objects that have come to be taken as symbolic summaries or metaphors of a place.

The axial dimension: City with „soul“

The type of symbolism that unmistakably dominates Belgrade’s identity, as depicted by our interviewees, is the behavioral one. This prevalence is most clearly expressed in answers to the question of what makes Belgrade recognizable,⁹ but the same type of symbolism is strongly present in replies to other identity questions as well – those about city symbols, and city brand.

9 As can be seen from the schedule question cited above, when asking about traits and aspects that distinguish Belgrade we invited our interviewees to compare it with other (European) cities of similar size.

The image that arises from most accounts of what sets Belgrade apart is that of a city which is *alive, vibrant, vivacious, boisterous*, where *you can never be bored* and whose *streets are always crowded*; a city distinguished by its *atmosphere or spirit*; a place that is made special by *its people*. One aspect, though certainly not the only, is the by now (in)famous Belgrade nightlife and partying.

It's lively. (RF17)¹⁰

People are much more outgoing than in any other place that I've been to. (RF12)

Relaxed way of living. (RF7)

It's more laid back and more comfortable in the sense if I'm in the street and I need help I can easily ask for it. (RF20)

This city has a soul all its own. And I'm so happy to see in foreigners who come here for the first time, that they can feel it, just as I do. (RF14)¹¹

The way people talk to each other all the time. People are not shy to involve you in conversations or ask you what you think or where to go. (RF18)

When you come here for the first time you can feel you're welcome, people are cordial, they want to help. (RD20)

The first impression is that everything is open until late hours, that people live here to the fullest, that they live sociably. (...) And these *kafanas*¹² (...) Even when you are short of money, you can still have fun. And cafes are full since 9 AM. (RF21)

Asked what is the *symbol* of Belgrade, one interviewee jokingly said:

Maybe sitting outside on some terrace, smoking a cigarette so you can watch people and people can watch you. (...) Looking important and busy while sitting and smoking [laugh]. (RF4)

Several others also chose behavioral items as the city's symbols:

Nightlife. (RD13)

Going out. Skadarlija.¹³ (RD15)

What distinguishes Belgrade from other European cities is going out, city life – the place is very lively. (RF16)

Even when selecting Belgrade's *brand*, which posed a challenge to most interviewees – we will discuss that later – behavioral elements were prominent:

10 Excerpts from interviews will be marked with interview codes, RF for foreigners and RD for locals, plus serial number.

11 The respondent is a Dutchman of Serbian background.

12 *Kafana*, literally „coffee-house“, is the traditional cafe-cum-restaurant with a relaxed, folksy atmosphere which has an almost mythical status as historically the hub of Serbian social, political and cultural life. For a charming exposition of *kafanology* as a branch of sociology, see Đorđević 2012.

13 Skadarlija is a cobbled, pedestrian street in downtown Belgrade, once a famed bohemian meeting place for writers and artists, now a tourist hotspot. Its dozens of restaurants offer traditional Serbian cuisine and live music.

Belgrade's brand for me are people in the streets. (RD20)

Hospitality of our people. (RD1)

Kafanas. (RD8)

Maybe the atmosphere (...) the energy, the people – something you cannot replace. (RD9)

Nightlife, clubs, bars, restaurants... There are outlets at every corner, and they're all open round the clock, so wherever you turn, you'll find something. (RD13)

Nightlife scene, maybe. *Splavovi*¹⁴ and the alternative scene. (RF19)

The primacy of behavioral symbolism is asserted in yet another, roundabout way, because it dominates answers to the question of what characterizes Belgrade not only positively but also negatively. Here, the bulk of opinions can be categorized under the keyword *disorganization*. The main villains are without doubt traffic and public transport: crowded, time-consuming, disorderly, poorly managed and maintained, air-polluting. This is by far the most often cited negative feature of Belgrade, by both foreign and local respondents.¹⁵

The public transportation is really bad. Generally, I think the city is not that big and the traffic is such a huge topic. Parking is horrible and it's missing. You can't ride a bicycle... Nobody thinks about pedestrians. (RF4)

The negative side refers to the poorly organized traffic which is a disaster. (RF1)

Public transport and roads are definitely not well adapted to the needs of daily life. (RD6)

Lack of good public transport is an issue. (RF10)

Poor maintenance of the city infrastructure and buildings is another minus:

Unfortunately, Belgrade is dirtier than other cities: many cigarettes and dog poop. (RF9)

Negligence, dirt, no care for the city as such. (RD14)

Maybe one could say it's a little dirty. I find it strange, parks are nice and clean... but sidewalks look really bad. No one fixes them, no one cleans them. (RF8)

Looking more closely, we understand that these critiques do not undermine the eulogies of Belgrade as a „city with soul“, but rather are its reverse side: relaxedness and vivacity seem almost to invite lack of regulation, poor organization, and management failures of all kinds. As such, both positive and negative terms belong squarely into behavioral symbolism.

14 *Splavovi*, literally „rafts“, are night clubs located in anchored boats off the banks of the Sava and the Danube, with a reputation for wildness.

15 One or two foreigners though note that traffic is normally a nuisance in large cities, e.g. „Traffic sometimes is heavy, but that being said for a capital of 2 million people, it's not so bad“ (RF3). One never finds such magnanimity among locals.

Some interviewees draw this ambivalent motif out, where lack of discipline or strictly enforced rules¹⁶ – a kind of „positive chaos“, we may call it – can be both good or bad, depending on the perspective:

Yeah, I mean that it's kind of a fairly uncoordinated place. [laugh] But it's also a part of its charm in a way. (...) And I quite like the fact that it's the sort of place where you can't live without breaking the rules, so you wake up every morning and you decide which rules you're gonna break today to get through the day. (RF18)

The level of chaos (...) and actually everything works in a weird way. (RF6)

Compared to Western European cities I think it is more relaxed, there is more of a sense of freedom. (...) If you go to a bar it says open until one, but they are probably going to stay open until 2 or 3. Things are more relaxed, but at the same time less ordered, it is both good and bad. (RF19)

All these semi-legal, strange things [referring to alternative culture venues], but (...) I always enjoy that about Belgrade. The more it gets regulated the more boring it becomes. (RF18)

Other European cities are cleaner, more orderly and transparent, yet at the same time emptier. So while it is not good for the workers that places are here open 24/7, on the other hand it's good to have stuff available at all times. While in European cities, there are fixed working hours and that's it, no life after that. (RD13)

While Belgrade perhaps has as an integral part of its soul this, how to put it... a degree of grittiness? It's hard to explain. (RF14)

It's really an interesting city, because I feel it is very alive but it has that feeling like it is dying because of all of its architecture, those communism buildings. The people are all like relaxed, but also like partying, like doing stuff, I don't know... a lot of contradictions. (RF11)

We will return to the motif of *contradiction* in a somewhat different guise later on.

A further twist is that for some respondents, mostly but not exclusively locals, what is generally praised the most actually deserves bitter criticism: they challenge the image of Belgrade as “nightlife capital” because they find it cheap, demeaning, and just plain wrong. Some choose to simply distance themselves and present such an image in reported speech, as something “people say” about Belgrade rather than their own opinion:

Maybe nightlife, that's what we are known for. (RD12)

I can say what I hear from others, what makes it distinctive. And what everyone says is, like, nightlife. *Splavovi*. (RF7)

Well, what makes it recognizable is certainly this hype about the tourist offer, *splavovi*, fun. About which I'm not sure at all, since I never go there. (RD10)

16 The ubiquitous smoking indoors is frequently noted by foreigners – never positively – as a manifestation of this laxity.

Still others do not hesitate to launch a full-blown attack on what they see as a profanation of Belgrade:

What is unfortunate and what pisses me off really is that Belgrade is being marketed as a place of attractive women and good food. It makes me sick, like, when journalists interview foreigners and ask them – How do you like our women? I mean, it's like Belgrade is a huge brothel where people are gorging on grilled meat, and there are pretty women walking around, ready to welcome strangers. (RD17)

It's horrible that we only offer these *splavovi*, this is awful and terrible, while there are so many more valuable things. Belgrade has much more to offer culturally than it cares to present, and this stresses me chronically, the fact that we have become known for *splavovi*, nightlife and parties. (RD9)

Evidently, a sort of subdued public debate on the appropriateness of such branding of Belgrade has been going on. In these discussions we can recognize elements of *discursive* symbolism, because the latter refers to narratives about a place, especially contentious ones.

A specific aspect of behavioral symbolism that has popped up occasionally, and seemingly contravening the „vivacious city“ image described above, is a sense of safety, in comparison with other big cities today. For some respondents, this becomes precisely what distinguishes Belgrade.

It's very safe, here I don't worry about crime compared to other cities. It's very approachable. (RF18)

What is specific is a certain safety that you feel while walking around town, e.g. it's not that there are parts of town where you shouldn't go for safety reasons, we don't have that in Belgrade yet. (RD21)

Safety and no hassle when you walk down the streets. You don't feel, like in the Netherlands where I grew up, that after a certain evening hour you'd better not be there. (...) People don't get into fights very often, which is counterintuitive, given the macho attitude of Serbian men which makes you expect a lot of brawls, but no. People are relaxed. (...) So it's this nice atmosphere when you go out at night that I think is Belgrade's brand. (RF14)

Thus it is not only „crazy nightlife“, where everything is permitted, but at the same time, and strangely, *safe* crazy nightlife, where nothing really bad is likely to happen to you.

Materializing identity

All other types of symbolism are best interpreted as secondary and complementing the pivotal, behavioral one. The first to be discussed, and in more length than the rest because it is the second most dominant type, is material symbolism. Materiality becomes more prominent in the selection of particular symbols, rather than generally discussing Belgrade's distinctiveness. This is only natural, since the question (What are the symbols of Belgrade

in your opinion?) encourages the respondents to think about material condensations, embodiments of the abstract phenomenon of „identity“ – about specific buildings, monuments, sites.

Overall, numerous individual items are cited,¹⁷ but they can easily be categorized in a few groups. One consists of the natural assets and the way Belgrade is physically embedded in its surroundings: the rivers (Sava, Danube, or both), their confluence (*Ušće*), the riverbanks and promenades, the bridges, the landscape itself – vistas and panoramas from different angles. The other group refers to the historical complex of the Belgrade Fortress (Kalemegdan). These two groups clearly have pride of place among selected symbols.¹⁸ Moreover, since they are physically and visually connected, they are frequently cited together, because they are felt to comprise an indivisible whole.

A nice picture is the Save and the Danube. You know, the path, the *kej* it's called. (RF17)

It's the coast of Kalemegdan, it's obvious. Promenade and everything that goes along rivers looks fantastic. (RF5)

Kalemegdan, Pobednik, the view of the rivers, and across to the other side, view of the fortress... Belgrade's position is very specific and this is a powerful symbol. (RD18)

Well, probably... the statue of Pobednik at Kalemegdan. (RD16)

Both rivers actually. (RF10)

Kalemegdan. And the view of New Belgrade. And all the historical facts that are behind this. (RF14)

Pobednik is always the symbol for me. (RD21)

Symbols change, Kalemegdan is forever. (RF1)

Certainly, it is the two rivers that set it apart. (RF7)

The third group consists of other landmark buildings and built structures: St. Sava Temple, Knez Mihajlova Street, the statue of Knez Mihajlo, the Cathedral (*Saborna crkva*), the Gardoš tower in Zemun, and, less frequently, city parks (Topčider, Košutnjak) which invoke the insertion of nature into the urban tissue.¹⁹

Fourthly, there are places that combine materiality and fun, thus straddling two types of symbolism, or even as many as three – material, behavioral, *and* gastronomic: cafes and restaurants in general (most frequently called their Serbian name – *kafana*), Skadarlija specifically, and open-air green markets (*pijaca*).

17 Since the interviewees were not restricted as to the number of symbols they choose, the landmarks were often mentioned together and in various combinations.

18 Note that the same material items also figure in answers about what makes Belgrade recognizable generally, and occasionally as city's brand.

19 These three first-ranking groups closely match the findings of Bursać (2009: 285–287), where the river confluence, Kalemegdan with Pobednik, and St.Sava Temple are by far the most frequently cited city symbols and/or markers that Belgrade is best known for.

The next important motif when material symbolism is concerned – mentioned either as city symbol, distinctiveness, or brand – is visual, historical and stylistic diversity or, when phrased less charitably, *mishmash* or *hotch-potch*. Let us note that this fits nicely with the pattern of *contradiction* and *chaos* identified above, and is hence congruent with the main thrust of behavioral symbolism.

First time I came the thing that shocked me the most was the combination of architectures, like this really old falling-apart stuff with this futuristic, modern stuff. (RF11)

What makes Belgrade interesting is this crazy architectural design, or lack of it. There is socialist architecture (...) then a mixture of pre-WWII buildings, some from Milošević times, and also some newer buildings. Taken together, it looks like a sort of magical realism. (RD3)

The river kind of divides the town: new and old Belgrade, it is interesting. (RF15)

The architectural medley includes the legacy of socialist-era construction:

Concrete apartment blocks in Novi Beograd are quite distinctive. (RF19)

If I picture Belgrade in my head that would be socialist architecture and socialist prints with flowers. (RF20)

and, even more importantly, visibly mixed influences of various historical civilizations, due to Belgrade's liminal position in terms of geography and political and cultural history:

If you go to Zemun it's bit of Austria or Hungary. If you are in Kalemegdan and look behind you that is Turkey (...) a mix of everything. (RF6)

We can clearly see that this was a faultline. We are on one side in Zemun, where you look at the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and on the other is the Ottoman Empire, then the Serbian kingdom etc. So you have this contact with the Orient, that's for me the first impression. (RF21)

The frontier between Central European, Austro-Hungarian culture, and Turkish on the other side. (RD16)

Here you can actually see the borderline between the Ottoman Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian one, you can feel the first shots fired in World War One. (...) And these walls, they are partly Serbian dating back to the era of Despot Stefan,²⁰ then Austro-Hungarian, then Turkish. (...) So for me this mixture symbolizes Belgrade indeed. (RF14)

There is one more interesting point that connects material symbolism to the behavioral one, and this is the opposition between a „lived“ city and an over-designed, streamlined „city for tourists“. A number of interviewees stress that downtown Belgrade is not just for tourists but is a place where „people really live“, and this contributes to its particular atmosphere. The downside for tourists is that

20 Serbian prince Stefan Lazarević (c.1377–1427) was an important builder of Belgrade, where he settled his court.

the city is to them relatively opaque and not easily manageable, because it has not been adapted specially to their needs. But the gain in return is authenticity, since it is much easier to get an immediate experience of „real“ life than in most other cities. One (local) interviewee draws this ambivalence out nicely:

In other cities there are specifically tourist centers, the downtown is for them exclusively, everything is in English, there is always a tourist route that you take. And on the other side is the section where inhabitants live. Here, it's all jumbled, so tourists find it a little bit harder to find their way, but I still think this is better because they can feel the spirit of the place. (RD8)

The way this combines with behavioral symbolism, and its various motifs identified in the previous section, can be seen from quotes like:

Belgrade is just so hard to describe, is not like any other city I've ever been to. (...) Belgrade doesn't strike me as a really tourist city compared to other places that I've seen in Europe, just feels more like a place to live. (RF11)

The thing specific about Belgrade is its personality. (...) It's not corporatized like many other cities (...) where you get just the same experience, from one city to the next. But Belgrade has something that's different, that is unique. That you can't get anywhere else. (RF13)

Tellingly, no interviewee argues for *more* touristification. On the contrary: they plead for Belgrade to „stay what it is“:

I think it is better not to brand it, because that would attract a wrong kind of audience. (RF16)

Furthermore, no respondent describes Belgrade as a place that is „beautiful“, „lovely“ or „cute“, „elegant“ or „glamorous“. Evidently, beauty in a standard sense is not to be counted among its virtues. Sometimes this is said quite bluntly:

The architecture let's say is not so impressive. (...) Sorry. [laugh] I mean the riverside is nice, but the town itself is pretty ugly. (RF17)

But this ugliness seems to end up as not just a disadvantage but precisely part of the charm. Here we are drawn back to the motif of contradiction, as perhaps *the* essence of Belgrade's identity:

I think that when you look at Belgrade from micro perspective (...) seems kind of not shabby, but kind of not really put together in an organized way. But when you look at the macro perspective, like a bird's view of it, it has all these hidden gems. When you put all those gems (...) together you get this beautiful unorganized... how to say this? Perfect chaos, imperfect balance, some kind of irony. (RF2)

Like a present wrapped in a boring paper, but when you open it you see so many things. (RF6)

Respondents, locals included, are aware that Belgrade has a comparatively low global visibility, and that there is no iconic landmark immediately and

unmistakably associated with it. This in fact means that material symbolism has in general a limited functionality (what use is a city symbol if no one can recognize it?).

True, the church of St.Sava and Kalemegdan are recognizable, but if a foreigner saw them in a photo, chances are s/he wouldn't exactly know where it is. (RD12)

In all, though material symbolism does play a part in defining what Belgrade is and how it is experienced, its scope is moderate and more often than not subordinate to the behavioral type, especially when listing the features of Belgrade in general terms. This relative scantness of symbolic materialization, which our research subjects are aware of, is of course related to historical vicissitudes, global and domestic, of wars, unrest and political instability, which have exposed the city to much destruction over the centuries.

Some interviewees note this explicitly:

Well, cultural monuments are limited by history and geography. So many monuments have perished in wars, and we can't now create something from 15th century, just to look better. (RD12)

This volatility has gained a new momentum in the past thirty postsocialist years, when identities at all levels is being reshuffled, but in the absence of definite, agreed upon guidelines and with the final destination uncertain to this day. That is perhaps one more reason that Belgrade finds refuge, so to speak, in behavioral symbolism.

Other identity props

The other types of symbolism are even less pronounced, although they of course do provide pieces in the overall puzzle of Belgrade's identity. As for *sign* symbolism, we have just concluded that Belgrade does not have a clear, unequivocal landmark that identifies it squarely and unmistakably: no Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera, Kremlin, Casa Milà, or anything of the sort. This means that the process of increasingly abstract symbolization – that is, of manifesting identity through sign symbolism – has not gone very far. The only real candidate is Pobednik,²¹ a 14m-tall statue located on a prominent spot at the edge of the Kalemegdan fortress, overlooking the river confluence and New Belgrade across the Sava. It straddles material and sign symbolisms, as a material object which over the decades has become intimately tied to Belgrade and thus approached as close as possible the status of the city's emblem. In our material, Pobednik is mentioned dozens of times, some of them quoted in the material symbolism section, in all „identity“ functions – as what makes Belgrade recognizable, its symbol, or a site worth visiting.

21 The statue, erected in 1928, was created by the famous Croatian and Yugoslav sculptor Ivan Meštrović. It is often used in institutional and commercial logos to denote Belgrade (e.g. in the longtime logo of Radio Television Belgrade).

But interestingly, this same Pobednik has been more than once subjected to contestation, skepticism and irony.

Of course, the overhyped Pobednik... (RD10)

I don't want to go for the clichéd symbols, like, you can't say that the Pobednik is a symbol of Belgrade. The real symbols are things like graffiti on the walls. (RF13)

I would say Pobednik, but that is symbol for other people, not for me. (RF19)

The symbol for me is Kalemegdan, I won't say Pobednik. (RF21)

An intriguing question thus opens up for further investigation: why is the only landmark with the potential to grow into a genuine symbol of Belgrade, at the same time so disputed?

Contrary to what may have been expected, and very different from what transpired in our previous study of Serbian towns, *gastronomic* symbolism has proved relatively weak for Belgrade's identity. It does not figure independently, but only in conjunction with behavioral and material ones, as noted above. This especially holds for Skadarlija, which in addition to being a physical place, also has strong behavioral and gastronomic dimensions, since the multifaceted experience of Skadarlija is to be taken in its totality – enjoying food, drink, music, fun, and atmosphere. Food and beverages, either in general or some specific kind, are never cited first among things that make Belgrade distinctive or its symbols, but only within broader narratives about what life in Belgrade is like, when tasty food, large servings and a specific eating culture are brought up. In addition, *ajvar* (a grilled red pepper condiment) and drinks such as coffee, *rakija* and *vinjak* (Serbian alcoholic drinks) are sometimes selected as Belgrade's brands. Interestingly, and against what Serbs like to think about themselves, for a couple of foreigners gastronomy featured as a *negative* attribute of Belgrade, through monotonous menus and limited choice of foodstuffs in shops and restaurants.

Personal symbolism is virtually absent: no proper name is mentioned as marking Belgrade, either in terms of recognizability, symbol, or brand. The only vague, and rather macabre reference to just two historical figures appears occasionally, and late in the interview: Josip Broz Tito's grave and the Nikola Tesla Museum²² are mentioned among recommended sites for a tourist to visit.

Somewhat better represented is *discursive* symbolism, though again thoroughly entwined with the behavioral one. It appears in two basic forms. One we already know – it is the disputation of Belgrade's image as a „nightlife capital“, wild and thrilling, but cheap and tawdry. The other is the juxtaposition of preconceptions and prejudices, derived from the dominant global public opinion since the 1990s, to the encounter with the real place, as will be discussed in the next section.

Emotional symbolism is another residual type. We can identify it as a transversal category in much of the substance of behavioral symbolism, when reference is made to moods and feelings, communication, and atmosphere.

22 Also a sort of grave, since the urn with Tesla's ashes is among the exhibits.

The relaxed, talkative, passionate „soul“ of Belgrade engrosses the visitor, as it does the permanent resident, and may even imply an attitude of „letting go“ and „everything is permitted“. On the other hand, crowded streets, heavy traffic and sometimes just „too much life“ can bring frustration and anger – the other, equally passionate side of Belgrade. The proverbial contradictory character of Belgrade phrased in emotional terms has been expressed most clearly by the Serbian-Dutch respondent quoted above, who defined Belgrade by its particular „soul“, which for him is:

...like a relationship with a person where you go through a roller coaster of emotions. So you get the whole range, from hate, anxiety, disappointment, to beautiful, fantastic moments that change your life in a way. This high level of emotions you experience in Belgrade, this binds you to the place. (RF14)

But beyond such rare cases of people who actually reflect quite a lot about their own relationship to Belgrade, emotional symbolism largely remains implicit, and while behavioral identity elements could easily be translated into emotional language, that would not bring much analytic benefit.

Belgrade people

The representation of Belgrade's inhabitants, prompted by the interview question „What do you think of Belgrade people, are they somehow specific?“, follows the same lines as the behavioral symbolism presented. After all, it was „people“ – people in general, rather than any specific, named individual, as in personal symbolism – that was sometimes invoked as Belgrade's symbol or brand. In answers to the question focusing on people, the inhabitants of Belgrade are portrayed as a rather noisy bunch you can have a very good time with with but who can also easily get on your nerves.

There are roughly four levels to this: on the one hand, Belgraders are outgoing, open, and friendly; second, they are full of energy, love fun, know how to live and enjoy themselves; the natural third complement to this is informality,²³ spontaneity and a laid-back, easygoing attitude, while the fourth dimension is a quasi-critical one of arrogance, pretense and conceit.

The characterization of Belgraders as warm, hospitable, and communicative by far prevails:²⁴

What is specific is the openness of people I've met here. (RF21)

In Belgrade it's easy to start talking to people. (RF1)

23 In the words of Isidora Sekulić (1962: 192), writing decades ago, „absolute aceremoniality“ is a major characteristic of „Belgrade people“.

24 Dissenting opinions happen but are rare, e.g. that the openness is relative and really only holds within smaller friendly circles (RF20), that cordiality is only at first blush but essentially people are closed (RD14), or that mistrust has been found to prevail, to the visitor's surprise (RF10).

They are specific for being really cordial and helpful. You can't find that in many other places, that you can approach anybody in the street and ask for help. (RD8)

This is a capital city but people stay close to each other. (RF4)

They are very open, especially to people from abroad. (RF16)

They're very chatty, it's easy to get into conversation. I think they're not so easy to become really friends with, because I think that's a very high responsibility in Serbia if you're friends. (RF18)

Warmth and aggression can be merged into one quality of *intensity*:

They are very intense, aggressive, they have very big hearts. I think they are very selfless people. (...) Some don't have a lot to offer but they will take their shirt off if they realize you need them. (RF2)

The motif of contradiction (once again) is explicated in this quote:

In a way, Belgraders have an inferiority and a superiority complex at once. ... They say: "I've been to this or that place, it's fantastic, while here everything sucks". And at the same time: "We are Belgrade. We have a centuries-old tradition. We were destined for great things, but so many bombings and destructions stopped us" – excuses all the time. So it's a kind of schizophrenia. (RF14)

When the negative aspects are highlighted, being pompous and irritating appears as the flip side of warmth and energy:

Sometimes I get the feeling they are quite self-confident, that they know a little more than anybody else. (RF1)

Belgraders are probably a little pretentious. (RD10)

Belgraders behave like snobs. They love expensive cafes... while maybe an ordinary cafe has no patrons even though its coffee costs twice as little as in the other one. I don't know why Belgraders go to such places, perhaps to show off their money. (RF8)

Some Belgrade people are little bit arrogant as opposed to other Serbians. (RF3)

I think they're very egocentric, super egos ... very egocentric and very emotional... and very argumentative, everybody knows everything better, they will tell you. (RF18)

Speaking of Belgrade people, many interviewees – interestingly, foreigners too – spontaneously invoke the dilemma of who actually "is" a Belgrader. They notice the symbolic division separating "old time Belgraders" from "newcomers", and the fraught relations between the two groups. Established Belgraders, with the so-called "several-generation pedigree" as city residents, are occasionally described as lazy, spoilt, and lacking ambition, and quite often as elitist, haughty and contemptuous towards "newcomers", that is, people who have moved to Belgrade from smaller towns and villages, or as war refugees.²⁵

25 For an incisive critique of the routine stigmatization of (real and imaginary) peasants, including refugees, in 1990s Belgrade see Jansen 2005: 109–168.

They look down upon people who come in from some smaller places. (RF16)

I've learned it the hard way, because I came here as a refugee. (...) I still feel the bitter taste, from that unfounded pride on their part. (...) People do not judge you by what you are, but by who is first, second, fifth or tenth generation Belgrader. (RD21)

A young local interviewee even coins a term for the self-congratulatory celebration of a mythologized Belgrade urban tradition:

We younger generations are a little bit tired of the constant invocations of this *belgradeism*, rock-n-roll and the artistic scene that existed then [in the 1980s], and which is quite elitist. (...) These older generations of Belgraders are specific in that they are very fond of bragging about being born in Belgrade, and are judgmental if you happen to come from somewhere else. (RD3)

Foreign interviewees were asked an additional question, about their prior ideas of Belgraders (Before coming here, did you have an idea about people living in Belgrade? What kind of idea?) Generally, there has not been much surprise: when anything was thought of Belgraders at all, most frequently it was that they were sociable, which was subsequently confirmed by immediate experience.

Before coming here the only stereotype that I have was that they are people who like to eat meat and enjoy life. (RF10)

Three respondents however say they were cautious because of the war. Interestingly, it was only at this point, that is, towards the end of the interview, that the war fought in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s is mentioned at all by our respondents, although it could have been expected to play a much more prominent role in the foreigners' attitude to Belgrade.

First time I was here in '99, I was a little bit uncertain due to a war, but after 2 months spent here I changed my mind. (RF3)

After all, one listens to stories about the wars from the 1990s where Serbs are not presented in a favorable light. (RF8)

I was very much involved in the post-war reconstruction in Bosnia and Croatia, so there were lots of preconceptions about Serbs. With the history of the war, people always say "they're scary" or something like that. But it's of course bullshit, there's nothing scary here. (RF18)

Conclusion

Our sample was relatively small and specific, therefore we do not claim to be offering a representative picture of *the* identity of Belgrade „as it is“. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to what extent our findings agree with those of others. What transpires from the foregoing analysis is that Belgrade has a fairly distinct and consistent identity, since there is a fair degree of consensus among our interviewees as to how best to describe it. However, it is not a branded, globally

recognizable place: in that sense its identity is not very strongly articulated. Still, this very condition in turn is seen by many as an advantage rather than a failing. A number of respondents insist on Belgrade's „uniqueness“ (it is like no other place I've been to, I cannot compare it to anything else, you can't get that anywhere in the world). While this sounds flattering, couldn't this be a way to avoid the unpleasant truth that Belgrade is hard to depict and represent in a condensed form? These difficulties of definition, when respondents are at a loss when reaching for a short and substantial answer, have to do with the prevalence of behavioral symbolism, which generally does not work very well as a principle on which to (self)identify cities.

Our previous elaboration of the model of urban symbolization (Spasić, Backović 2017) argued that the manner of symbolizing a place – which type of symbol is prominent and how, and which one is not – tells us something about the construction and internal structure of its identity. Thus while among the features thought to make Belgrade recognizable, behavioral symbolism clearly reigns, among selected city *symbols* material symbolism becomes significant, but does not erase the behavioral component. The list of material landmarks is relatively brief and consensual – it consists mainly of items linked to Belgrade being positioned at the junction of two rivers, including the Kalemegdan fortress as the city's oldest core, not accidentally located precisely on the spot. When discussing city *brand*, hesitation and perplexion of the respondents – many didn't answer or said they didn't know – indicate that, effectively, Belgrade does not have a brand, for, that would presume instant recognizability across a wide audience. The same is confirmed in answers to the remaining interview questions, like sightseeing recommendations, where, again, behavioral symbolism prevails: the usual tourist fare (museums, galleries, monuments) is described as sparse and can be “ticked off“ within a day or two, while what really matters is to „just walk around“, „experience the place“, „feel the beat of the city“, „sense the energy“, „meet people“ etc. In sum, there is a limited supply of material landmarks, which is due to historical discontinuities plus negligence;²⁶ additionally, those iconic landmarks that are available are not globally known and thus their potency is restricted. This deficiency is then offset on the behavioral front: people and „life“ become what marks Belgrade.

This overall view of Belgrade's identity, which accounts for most of our data, is complemented by a skeptical attitude towards branding, and generally a non- or even anti-commercial sentiment, repeatedly manifested across a number of interviews. Belgrade is identified, and praised, as a place that has not yet been fully commercialized and typified, and hope is expressed that it will manage to keep that way. The theme of *authenticity* proves quite important in depicting Belgrade. Related to this is the resistance to the idea of emulating any other city,²⁷ and the opinion prevails that Belgrade should remain faithful to its own self. All this is consistent with the characterizations in behavioral terms.

26 The relation between architecture, memory, destruction and (loss of) Belgrade's urban identity is discussed by Nikolina Bobić (2017). The most recent, chaotic urban renewal is chronicled by the former city architect Đorđe Bobić (2020).

27 The only city mentioned as a place from which Belgrade can learn something, but exclusively in terms of urban management and cleanliness, is Vienna, while the only other to which it is directly compared, once or twice, is – not surprisingly – Berlin.

In some respects the image of Belgrade that emerges from these data resembles Richards and Palmer's (2010) notion of the „eventful city“. Similarities, however, do not go very far. Richards and Palmer focus on events, foremostly cultural ones, carefully planned and managed by professional staff, administered, monitored, and evaluated for effects. On the other hand, what we have in Belgrade is an amorphous quality of atmosphere, energy, feeling; that is, a loose experience, or rather potential for experience, as opposed to particular, discrete events. And whereas in Richards and Palmer the approach is instrumental and strategic,²⁸ an inalienable part of Belgrade's identity as depicted in our interviews is precisely a *lack* of strategy, a spontaneity and authenticity that the respondents see as its strong assets.

The coherence of Belgrade in our data is paradoxical, because it is premised on the notion of *incoherence*, that is, contradiction, along with related categories of liminality, imperfection, disorder, and muddle. These same motifs have been noted as features of Belgrade's identity for one hundred years already, in literary and academic descriptions. It was reportedly none lesser than Le Corbusier who, back in 1911, exclaimed: Belgrade is the ugliest town in the most beautiful place! Ambiguity, hybridity, incompleteness, internal cleavages are stressed by the writer Boško Tokin – who calls Belgrade an „unfinished symphony“ – in the late 1920s,²⁹ and, in a strikingly similar fashion, by anthropologist Marko Živković (2011) eighty ears later.

That contradiction and disorder are among the keywords for describing Belgrade chimes in with Kadrijević's (2017) analysis of the wildly shifting urban matrix throughout Belgrade's modern development, resulting in a series of ruptures, discontinuities, gaps and erasures of the past, often without a proper plan to lean on. Historian Nikola Samardžić (2012: 7) reminds that among European capitals Belgrade is “the one that has suffered most destruction, migration, economic collapses and crises of identity during the two centuries of modern history”. In the three decades of postsocialism especially, changed political and institutional frameworks disrupted previously existing town planning standards, so that arbitrariness and investor-directed planning become major strategies of an entrepreneurial model of urban management.³⁰ Even though it belongs to Europe, Belgrade has never managed to fully regulate itself according to „European standards“,³¹ or to conform to the image of a (West) “European city”. Traces of Ottoman cultural heritage, strong rural component, and the remaining socialist legacy all contribute to its contradictory character. Yet this precisely seems at the same time to be what binds people to Belgrade and makes the place so irresistible.

28 Events are seen as „part of this process of transforming cities into smoother running cultural operations“ with the aim of „enabling the city to compete more effectively in the global arena“ (Richards, Palmer 2010: 12, 30).

29 For anthropological layers in Tokin's novel, see Đerić (2014).

30 Urban actors in current transformation processes are discussed in Vujović (2004) and Vujović, Petrović (2007).

31 A compelling portrayal of Belgrade's never-quite-achieved modernization at the turn of 20th century may be found in Stojanović (2009, 2013) and Vučetić (2018).

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