

## Can Planning Solutions be Evaluated without Insight into the Process of their Creation?

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### 1 ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on an analysis of the political project of Belgrade Waterfront as a drastic case of usurpation of formal planning procedures and the role of experts in the creation of planning solutions. As a campaign tool of the ruling political party, this project has evolved into an urban plan of national importance, and substantial modifications to the existing planning system in Serbia have been made to allow it to be achieved. In a completely non-transparent manner, and without professional involvement, changes have been made to the legal framework, system planning hierarchy, competences for planning decision-making, as well as to planning constraints for the site in question. Notwithstanding all these issues, there was no broad-based reaction by experts.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the tone of day-to-day media reporting so as to determine the main stakeholders and how they speak about the project, and, having recognised these interests and power distribution, identify the real views of the profession about the project. Emphasis is placed on discovering the cause behind the lack of response by the profession, in particular in the context in which the planning system operates. Results of this research should indicate the main problems facing the system and, consequently, produce guidelines for its improvement.

### 2 INTRODUCTION

Serbia's political transition after 2000, development of democratic governance, shift to a market economy, and orientation towards moving the Serbian society into European and broader global integrations, have all transformed the framework within which planning and spatial development systems operate. The new social and economic order has altered both the concept of spatial intervention and professional approaches to spatial and urban planning. Yet there has been no fundamental change in the practice of planning and spatial development – because there has been no fundamental change towards either establishing a market economy or instituting democratic decision-making procedures that are of importance for spatial development. The differences between the state, power, society and the public sector in Serbia have been perceived but have not been defined in a corresponding manner in the sense of operationalisation in relation to the concrete issues and the tasks being of particular significance for planning (Lazarevic Bajec 2009, 86). The socialist-era comprehensive planning system that remains in effect in Serbia does not recognise the legitimacy of a plurality of interests and the open market.

Serbia's transition has left spatial development in a state of confusion with which the profession has been unable to cope, causing, in the end, a mismatch between spatial development documents and the needs of urban development. Many authors agree that the current planning practice in Serbia is obsolete and that planning documents are inflexible and inefficient with regard to current development needs (Lazarević Bajec, 2007; Lazarević Bajec, 2009; Vujošević & Nedović Budić, 2006; Vujošević, 2004). One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the lack of true communication between planners and decision-makers, manifested through the absence of a communications platform that would inform decision-making about spatial development as a framework for modern planning. Post-socialist transition countries are characterised by neglect of planning and ad hoc decisions at the local government level that reject long-term strategic visions of urban development. On the other hand, professionals do not co-operate with decision-makers at the strategic level. In practice, the traditional planning system has survived, and is dominated by a focus on narrowly technical matters and lack of integrity on the part of planning professionals with regard to demands posed by politicians and/or investors (Petrovic, 2009). On the other hand, the spatial development decision-making process is opaque and limited to a narrow circle of stakeholders. The problems that this state of affairs creates are made even more pronounced in times of economic crisis.

The problem is compounded by the traditional training of urban planners, which takes place within the framework of studies of architecture, formally a technical science, and where professional licences are acquired under the supervision of engineering associations. This means that urban planning practice is

traditionally rooted in technical disciplines and oriented towards engineering skills, and does not recognise the need to incorporate knowledge from the humanities. Planners are consequently left unable to understand the complexity of the altered socio-economic framework, which requires democratic analysis and market-oriented action, as well as how these changes have affected the role of the planning profession. Although experts used to enjoy a monopoly on setting development priorities, their position is undermined as day-to-day development decisions are made elsewhere. The establishment of democratic planning in a post-socialist transition environment has radically changed views of justification for planning actions. Public interest, for decades the source of planning legitimacy, has lost its privileged position as the sole, indisputable, 'higher' reason that may not be brought into question (Vujošević & Petovar, 2006). Trained as architects, spatial development experts are not able to cope with the issues and problems imposed by the new socio-economic environment.

This critical state of affairs within the profession and practice of spatial development in Serbia has culminated in the Belgrade Waterfront project, promoted by Serbia's new governing parties after the 2012 general election. Belgrade Waterfront was first presented in parliament during the current ruling party's election campaign as an effort that held the promise of a brighter future for the Serbian capital. Promotional materials presented a vision of the city that offered economic recovery through a form of public-private partnership where – according to this particular vision – the city and the state stood to benefit in multiple ways. No spatial development plans or projects, no economic or other expert studies were offered in support of this vision. There were no documents, just ideas and promises.

After its landslide victory, the ruling party set about putting into effect the ideas presented in the election campaign. This was the turning point in the usurpation of the planning system, where the strategic decision was taken at the political level, bypassing any discussions within a broader platform of relevant stakeholders. A number of steps were taken thereafter that dealt severe blows to the foundations of Serbia's planning system and brought the existence of the planning profession into question.

This paper aims at illustrating the problems faced by spatial development in Serbia, where the planning system has been usurped by political stakeholders in public administration, and the public lacks competence to cope with the complex post-socialist context Serbia has found itself in. The Belgrade Waterfront project is an extreme case in which all of these problems are manifested to their fullest extent, and, as such, constitutes an important research arena.

### **3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DECISION-MAKING ABOUT SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES**

This paper studies how decisions are made about spatial development policies in Serbia, as well as the position of the profession in the decision-making system and its competence to take part in decision-making. The value framework in which Serbia's spatial development operates is far removed from the principles of transparency, democracy, and institutional organisation that today's planning paradigm relies upon. In the ideal situation, establishing the transparent process of decision making is requested, the process that incorporates all interests, those which are represented in the process and those that are not and, basing the process on the accurate information which everyone has the right to review (role of the planner, the experts) (Healley and Amdam in Lazarevic Bajec, 2009,90).

Decision-making and consensus-building with regard to development policies are of crucial importance for spatial development. The conditions for effective and legitimate policy processes in the national and international system have changed fundamentally. Governance, as the key concept, means the body of rules, enforcement mechanisms and corresponding interactive processes that coordinate and bring into line the activities of the involved persons with regard to a common outcome. Good governance implies effective political institutions and the responsible use of political power and management of public resources by the state. Good governance extends beyond the public sector to include all other actors from the private sector and society; it is guided by human rights and by the principles of the rule of law and democracy, such as equal political participation for all (ODCP).

The planning paradigm has shifted across the globe, and this shift has altered the planner's role in the planning process. In contrast to his or her earlier role – that of an independent expert, acting either in opposition to or in concert with the authorities – the planner is now an active participant in the creation of

spatial development policies. The role of the planner has become key in organising this process, bringing stakeholders together, distributing information, building trust amongst the actors, articulating interests, and facilitating stakeholder dialogue. This new role of the profession requires a different understanding of the planning process, and, as such, new skills and knowledge that go beyond engineering.

Planners are expected to take part in the entire spatial development policy-making process and work with a broad range of stakeholders. Given this decision-making framework, experts are the only persons able to take stock of development vision in a complex and holistic manner; support the collection and preparation of arguments and support for the development interests of participants in this process; and, finally, experts alone can view the different interests through the lens of spatial planning solutions and recognise likely outcomes (Healey, 1991; Alexander, 1992).

#### 4 DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY AND UNITS OF ANALYSIS

This paper focuses on uncovering the reasons behind the lack of an appropriate response by the professional public to the Belgrade Waterfront project. Although this project has quite evidently usurped the entire planning system, there has been no major resistance on the part of architects and planners. As reasons for the absence a professional reaction are not immediately obvious, the method of discourse analysis was chosen to investigate the background to this phenomenon. This approach allows hidden meanings of a particular phenomenon to be uncovered (Skillington, 1998).

Discourse analysis is a qualitative form of research that aims at explaining a particular form of behaviour in greater detail, and at answering the question of ‘why’. Discourse analysis assumes that a phenomenon/discourse can be understood only if the context in which it arises is clarified. There are no neutral discourses; every discourse entails a set of meanings and values. This means that the discourse concept carries a value component within itself. Discourse analysis attempts to unmask the power relationships in a society (Van Dijk, 1993), and its ultimate objective is social criticism.

The message that is relayed in a discourse is crucial to discourse analysis. This study therefore aims at studying the statements of various actors involved with the Belgrade Waterfront project and the reactions of the professional public. Their narratives – their versions of events – are self-serving, and as such reveal the respective value systems they support. The examination of actors’ statements was not restricted to commenting on the content, but also entailed analysing the structure, form, and organisation of the published texts.

This study analysed the key statements made by the relevant stakeholders – selected as units of analysis – between April 2012, when Belgrade Waterfront was first presented, and late 2014, which saw the adoption of the planning document formally allowing the project to go ahead. All actors who showed an interest in the project or readiness to talk about it were identified as relevant stakeholders. News items published in reputable media, such as *Politika*, *Danas* and *Blic* daily newspapers, the B92 broadcast and online media group, etc. were taken into consideration. The choice of media was seen as particularly important for research methodology, since there is broad consensus that media freedoms in Serbia are being restricted by the governing political party. The selection of media outlets reflects the value framework they promote, which is of exceptional importance for the application of the discourse analysis method.

#### 5 PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

Research results are presented in the form of a table (Table 1). Statements – units of analysis – made by relevant actors (politicians, experts, investors, etc.) are shown in isolation. These statements are complemented by information about the interests each stakeholder stands for; key parts of statements that indicate each stakeholder’s value orientation are given emphasis in the text. The table also contains the date each statement was made, media outlet where it was published, and title of the news item in which the statement was carried, which also holds a value component. The statements were taken verbatim from the news items and are arranged in chronological order to ensure greater clarity.

DATE, MEDIA OUTLET, TITLE	BELGRADE WATERFRONT STAKEHOLDER STATEMENT
12.04.2012, <i>Vesti SNS</i> [SNS News Bulletin] <i>Beograd na vodi kao</i>	<b>Aleksandar Vučić, at the time standing for election as Mayor of Belgrade on behalf of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)</b> ‘The Belgrade Waterfront project will attract investors, generate employment, give

<p><i>svetska metropola</i> [‘Belgrade Waterfront as global metropolis’]</p>	<p>Belgraders jobs, and <u>reveal the fairer side of our city...</u> The project was developed by a top-flight Swiss company, and today we will attempt to reveal something that has for decades been nothing but a dream for Belgrade, <u>something no-one even had a concept for, let alone a project.</u> We have developed a complete project and we will show it to you, we will show you a film of it... I think this is <u>absolutely one of the largest projects that Belgrade and Serbia can have...</u> <u>we have secured investor support, I will of course tell you all about it, there will be tenders for everything,</u> but what I can tell you in advance is that many people are interested in paying for this project to go ahead... We will do our part of the work in terms of providing land for construction and infrastructure, but everything else will be up to the investor. The investor will pay, because it will make money, and Belgrade will profit from what they have paid.’</p>
<p>12.04.2012, Vesti SNS [SNS News Bulletin] <i>Beograd na vodi kao svetska metropola</i> [‘Belgrade Waterfront as global metropolis’]</p>	<p><b>Jasmina Kojić, architect, at the project’s presentation organised by the SNS</b> ‘Let me underline that this entire project <u>complies</u> with amendments to the Master Urban Plan, which means that it also complies with the Master Zoning Plan.’</p>
<p>01.08.2013, Blic <i>Đilas: „Beograd na vodi“ i metro promeniće sliku grada</i> [‘Đilas: Belgrade Waterfront and metro to redefine city’]</p>	<p><b>Dragan Đilas, Mayor of Belgrade</b> ‘I believe that if <u>national and city authorities co-operate</u> on the metro project and this project we can do something that is truly good for all Belgraders.’</p>
<p>01.08.2013, Blic <i>Vučić i Đilas do kraja nedelje o „Beogradu na vodi“</i> [Vučić and Đilas to talk Belgrade Waterfront by end of week]</p>	<p><b>Aleksandar Jovičić, head of SNS councillors’ group in Belgrade’s local parliament</b> ‘What is important is that we, as the opposition party in the capital, will not give up on modernising Belgrade; rather, we would like to offer <u>contacts with both United Arab Emirates</u> and other global investors, since the Serbian Government – with the SNS at its centre – has opened the country up to all partners throughout the world, and we want to use this potential.’</p>
<p>13.08.2013, Blic <i>Bijelić: „Beograd na vodi“ ne može bez podrške države i evropskih fondova</i> [Bijelić: Belgrade Waterfront requires support from national government, EU funds]</p>	<p><b>Aleksandar Bijelić, head of the Democratic Party’s Infrastructure Committee</b> ‘Belgrade Waterfront is definitely one of the largest projects in the city, besides the metro, that <u>cannot be completed without support from the national government and EU funds.</u>’</p>
<p>20. 08. 2013, Blic <i>Ljubitelji železnice protiv izmeštanja pruge uz Savu</i> [Railway enthusiasts protest removal of Sava railway tracks]</p>	<p><b>Karlo Polak, transportation engineer, head of the Railway Enthusiasts Association</b> ‘At a time when Bratislava and London are investing vast sums in bringing railways closer to the centres of their cities, Belgrade is doing the opposite <u>by planning to dismantle an existing railway line running through the very core of the city.</u>’</p>
<p>20.10.2013, Belgrade Chamber of Commerce <i>„Beograd na vodi“ za 6 do 8 godina</i> [Belgrade Waterfront to be complete in six to eight years]</p>	<p><b>Srdan Rugar, engineer and planner, Belgrade Waterfront project manager</b> ‘<u>A team of some 20 people has been formed</u> that has been working to develop the project, title issues have been cleared up, title deeds for more than 400 cadastral lots have been obtained, and approvals have been received from all 19 public enterprises at both national and city level for existing infrastructure to be relocated.’</p>
<p>25.12.2013, Blic <i>Čović: Tražimo investitora za Beograd na vodi</i> [Čović: Investor sought for Belgrade]</p>	<p><b>Nebojša Čović, member of Belgrade caretaker administration</b> ‘You do not have to borrow to finance such investment, <u>you can find an investor with an interest</u> to embark on a major project such as Belgrade Waterfront. We have no intention of borrowing to build it, we are seeking <u>partnerships</u> for this investment cycle... As a project of national importance, Belgrade Waterfront will be prioritised and the <u>time-consuming procedures</u> we face in Belgrade can be <u>shortened.</u>’</p>

<b>Waterfront]</b>	
24.12.2013, <i>Politika</i> <b>Emirati finansiraju tržni centar „Beograda na vodi“</b> [UAE to fund Belgrade Waterfront shopping mall]	<b>Aleksandar Karlovčan, Belgrade Waterfront project co-ordinator and member of SNS Governing Board</b> ‘The 66 million euros will come from the 2014 national budget through the Ministry of Transportation. We will attempt to get money from the United Arab Emirates not just for construction works in the Sava Amphitheatre, which have been valued at some 3.1 billion dollars, but also for clearing the site... We are certain we have an investor from the UAE for the shopping mall. We have been working with a team of their urban planners to develop the master plan for the area... There are two possible models of financing construction. Either the Emirates investor will buy up lot after lot and pay the required infrastructure development charges, or they will get the lots free of charge and build, whilst Serbia will receive one-third... There will be no public competition, but we will include all relevant institutions in the project, such as the Faculties of Architecture and Civil Engineering, the Chamber of Engineers, and other professional organisations.’
09.01.2014, <i>Blic</i> <b>Vučić: Al Abar u Beograd na vodi ulaže 3,1 milijardu dolara</b> [Vučić: Alabbar to invest USD 3.1bn in Belgrade Waterfront]	<b>Aleksandar Vučić, First Deputy Prime Minister</b> ‘[Alabbar’s] <u>concept</u> calls for <u>us to clear the site</u> : that should be the only requirement for Serbia. He will provide 3.1 billion dollars to build everything. Then we have to see how we will collect the proceeds from the sale once everything is complete. This will change everything.’
09.01.2014, <i>Novosti</i> <b>„Beograd na vodi“: Za početak hotel i šoping mol</b> [Belgrade Waterfront to start with hotel and shopping mall]	<b>Srdan Rugar, Belgrade Waterfront project manager</b> Serbian Railways <u>have been ordered</u> to start dismantling railway tracks along the Sava riverbank as early as June. Once this work is done, infrastructure construction will begin on part of the Phase One, which involves <u>building the largest shopping mall in this part of Europe</u> and a luxury hotel.’
09.01.2014, <i>Novosti</i> <b>„Beograd na vodi“: Za početak hotel i šoping mol</b> [Belgrade Waterfront to start with hotel and shopping mall]	<b>Aleksandar Karlovčan, Belgrade Waterfront project co-ordinator and member of SNS Governing Board</b> ‘The <u>planning documents will be flexible</u> ... As <u>we in the SNS Governing Board have promised</u> , <u>draft planning documents</u> will be complete by late January and presented for public discussion in February.’
17.01.2014, <i>Blic</i> <b>Vučić: Uz „Beograd na vodi“ Srbija sigurno izlazi iz krize</b> [Vučić claims Belgrade Waterfront is Serbia’s way out of crisis]	<b>Aleksandar Vučić, First Deputy Prime Minister</b> ‘If we succeed, and we will do our best [to build Belgrade Waterfront], and we will succeed because we have raised the bar so high, I am absolutely certain this will mean the construction industry will recover from the crisis... <u>this means that our country is sure to recover from the crisis</u> .’
18.01.2014, <i>Blic</i> <b>Al Abar predstavio Vučiću projekat „Beograd na vodi“: Arapi grade apartmane, hotele, molove, operu</b> [Alabbar presents Belgrade Waterfront project to Vučić: Arabs to build hotels, apartments, shopping malls, opera]	<b>Eagle Hills, official press release</b> ‘The project will be built thanks to the <u>strong bilateral relations between the UAE and Serbia</u> , that have improved in particular following the recent visit to Belgrade of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan.’
19.01.2014, <i>Blic</i> <b>Stefanović: „Beograd na vodi“ budućnost za grad i Beogradane</b> [Stefanović: Belgrade	<b>Nebojša Stefanović, Speaker of the Serbian Parliament and SNS Vice-President</b> ‘We have shown that <u>we are able to think in strategic terms</u> and that we are able to attract investors who will bring in money, rather than waiting for some pittance to come from the national budget as a gift.’

<p><b>Waterfront means future for city and residents of Belgrade]</b></p>	
<p>20.01.2014, Blic <i>Predsednik Udruženja arhitekata: Raspisati konkurs za projekat „Beograd na vodi“</i> [Head of architects' association wants competition for Belgrade Waterfront]</p>	<p><b>Igor Marić, President of the Serbian Architects' Association</b> ‘The design for developing the part of Belgrade along the Sava waterfront should be chosen in an <u>international competition</u>, rather than having this large-scale Belgrade Waterfront project built in an ad hoc manner... The Serbian Architects' Association welcomes any initiative to develop this neighbourhood, but a <u>comprehensive, thorough plan needs to be prepared and the broader public and professionals should be involved</u> in the development of this Belgrade on the Sava.’</p>
<p>20.01.2014, Blic <b>Vučić o „Beogradu na vodi“: Posao će biti završen</b> [Vučić talks Belgrade Waterfront: Job will get done]</p>	<p><b>Aleksandar Vučić, First Deputy Prime Minister</b> ‘We will <u>abide by statutory procedures</u> and adopt everything required by law, but <u>one must respect other people's money</u>. <u>If you think</u> we can join Europe and joke about other people's money in the process, that <u>our cleverness is more important than someone's three billion dollars</u>, I have got to ask you where do you think we are living.’</p>
<p>20.01.2014, Blic <i>Transparentnost Srbija: Da li je za „Beograd na vodi“ isključena konkurencija?</i> [Transparency Serbia: Is competition excluded from Belgrade Waterfront?]</p>	<p><b>Transparency Serbia, official press release</b> ‘In the future, when a potential investor presents a project that calls for a joint venture where the state or city provides land, and the investor puts up the funding, will this offer be taken up, or <u>will investors be treated selectively?</u> <u>What is the legal basis of this joint venture</u>, is it a public-private partnership, and if so has the Public-Private Partnerships Commission reviewed it as envisaged under the 2011 law?’</p>
<p>20.01.2014, Blic <i>Nikodijević: Prva faza projekta „Beograd na vodi“ u septembru</i> [Nikodijević claims first stage of Belgrade Waterfront project will start in September]</p>	<p><b>Nikola Nikodijević, member of Belgrade caretaker administration</b> ‘When it comes to title issues, 95 percent of all of this land is completely clear in that regard because it is state-owned, or, rather, held by Serbian Railways, whilst compulsory purchase of the remaining land <u>will be facilitated by the enactment of legislation to declare the project a matter of national importance</u>.’</p>
<p>01.03.2014, Blic <i>U Dubaiju predstavljamo, u Kanu premijera „Beograda na vodi“</i> [Belgrade Waterfront to be presented in Dubai, premiered at Cannes]</p>	<p><b>Siniša Mali, economy advisor to First Deputy Prime Minister</b> ‘Tomorrow is the most important day in the development of Belgrade Waterfront to date. This is a key day because after that we can <u>start preparing urban plans and all other planning documents</u> needed to implement the project... The final presentation of the project's master plan will be made by <u>Mohammad Alabbar</u>, the author of the <u>project</u>.’</p>
<p>11.03.2014, Blic <i>Počela obnova Beogradske zadruga</i> [Renovation works start on Belgrade Savings Bank building]</p>	<p><b>Goran Vesić, secretary of the Belgrade caretaker administration</b> ‘This is a momentous day. We are beginning renovation work on the Belgrade Savings Bank building at a time when <u>the Belgrade Waterfront project is having its premiere at Cannes</u>, at the world's largest real estate fair.’</p>
<p>26.06.2014, Danas <i>Čemu služi Beograd na vodi</i> [What is Belgrade Waterfront for]</p>	<p><b>Ivan Rašković, Belgrade Architects' Society</b> ‘The aim of this project is fantastic, but the way it is being pursued is terrible... The whole <u>affair is being handled without a public competition</u>. All regulations enacted in recent months only serve to create a legal framework that will allow the investor to turn a profit.’</p>
<p>27.06.2014, Blic <i>OTKRIVENA MAKETA Ovo je „Beograd na vodi“</i> [Belgrade Waterfront model presented]</p>	<p><b>Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister</b> ‘This building is more than a model, take a look around, it looks like a museum piece. This building has changed the whole appearance of Karadjordjeva Street, and our plan is to change this part of the city <u>and to make the face of Serbia as beautiful and as clean as this building</u>.’</p>

<p>27.06.2014, Politika <i>Mali: Beograd na vodi istorijska šansa i za celu Srbiju</i> [Mali calls Belgrade Waterfront historic chance for all of Serbia]</p>	<p><b>Siniša Mali, Mayor of Belgrade</b> ‘Each resident of Belgrade and every Serbian citizen <u>will here be able to see what this project will look like</u> and find any information they may be interested in... This is how we would like to show that the city’s authorities can quickly and efficiently issue all the approvals needed <u>and work with the investor to solve problems</u>... This primarily refers to <u>completing the necessary paperwork</u>, obtaining all documents required to allow a building permit to be issued for the project.’</p>
<p>05.10.2014, Politika <i>„Beograd na vodi“ neće biti džungla oblakodera</i> [Belgrade Waterfront will be no skyscraper jungle]</p>	<p><b>Nebojša Stefanović, Director of Belgrade Urban Planning Agency</b> ‘<u>Vistas of the old town from New Belgrade will be affected</u>. But we have protected the vistas from the opposite side of the Sava Amphitheatre... Belgrade Waterfront will be no skyscraper jungle... <u>The investor was surprised to learn everything had to be publicly owned</u>... There was no competition <u>because that was the agreement between the politicians and the investor</u>. This is a project of national importance... <u>We adjusted the investor’s concept</u> in line with our professional views, legislation, and conditions imposed by 75 city and national authorities.’</p>
<p>06.11.2014, Politika <i>SANU iznela 22 stranice primedaba na „Beograd na vodi“</i> [Serbian Academy presents 22 pages of objections against Belgrade Waterfront]</p>	<p><b>Members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts Architecture and Urban Planning Committee</b> ‘Unless the draft spatial plan is changed, <u>Belgrade Waterfront will remain an isolated island at the centre of the capital</u>, difficult to get to and move through, and will cause problems with traffic in other parts of the city as well.’</p>
<p>15.11.2014, Politika <i>Šlaufima i pesmom protiv „Beograda na vodi“</i> [Activists deploy swim rings, songs against Belgrade Waterfront]</p>	<p><b>Activists of the Ne da(vi)mo Beograd group</b> [ ‘We will not allow public funds to be spent on private projects that create nothing but spatial segregation and traffic jams. The development, functioning, and identity of a city <u>cannot be dictated by investors’ wishes</u>, but rather must be based on the needs of society.’</p>

### 5.1 Vision of a better future (12 April 2012 – 24 March 2014)

The ideas that would later coalesce as the Belgrade Waterfront project first emerged on 12 April 2012, in the context of the election campaign waged by a leading Serbian political party that was at the time attempting to gain power. Presented to journalists during a river cruise, the project was billed as Serbia’s greatest development plan. In addition to a short film, which was shown only to the journalists present but whose content largely went unreported, the presentation included only a description of the intended uses of the various parts of the site and physical structures, as well as the approximate location where construction would take place. Brief information about the planned areas and profits was also presented, but no professional analyses or studies were cited in support of these estimates. Although a project developed by a ‘reputable foreign firm’ was mentioned, none was presented (nor was the firm named). To emphasise the originality of this idea, it was falsely claimed that no project had ever existed for this location.<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1.) The project was presented as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that would secure the future of both the capital and the country as a whole. Yet there was less clarity as to how investment was to be attracted for this project. It was hinted that investors had been selected in advance, although procedures required a public

<sup>1</sup> Belgrade’s ‘descent’ on the Sava River, to an area popularly known as the Sava Amphitheatre, is a very old concept that has been cropping up in public from time to time for decades. It first made an appearance in the 1923 Master Plan for Belgrade, authored by the architect Đorđe Kovaljevski. Some years later, in 1929, another architect, Nikola Dobrović, recognised the potential of the Sava Amphitheatre’s location in his design for the Terazije Terrace, developing these ideas further in his 1948 outline urban plan. The same ideas appear again in the 1972 Urban Master Plan for Belgrade, where they are part of a study for the development of Belgrade’s central core. The exclusive nature of the riverfront location was re-affirmed in the 1984 amendments to the urban plan, which made it possible to hold a major international competition, in 1986, where authors were invited to submit projects for this area of the city. In the early 1990s the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts also held an internal competition for designs for this location, under the motto ‘Third Millennium’. A concept entitled ‘Europolis’ was promoted during the 1995 election campaign. Finally, the 2003 Master Plan provided a platform for the development of commercial facilities and other amenities appropriate to the core of the city in the Sava Amphitheatre. In 2006, a concept was developed under the title of ‘Waterfront Town’, which one Belgrade municipality exhibited at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

competition for projects of such magnitude. Although this statement was later retracted, the contradiction was never fully cleared up. In addition, the role of the state in the project remained vague, in particular in terms of its financial commitments in constructing infrastructure at the site before construction could begin in earnest.



Figure 1. Site location of the project "Belgrade Waterfront"

Interestingly, when Belgrade Waterfront was first unveiled, an architect was on hand to claim, on behalf of the political party presenting the scheme, that the project was in compliance with existing planning documents. This statement showed a starting level of ignorance of the actual state of affairs and the content of planning documents.

Apart from the absence of basic planning documentation, many issues remained obscure after this first presentation, of which two were key: how would strategic documents pertaining to the spatial development of this major urban area be adopted – what would be the roles of the various stakeholders, in particular of planning experts; and, what expenses taxpayers would face.

After the election campaign ended, Belgrade Waterfront came to prominence again only in August 2013, when this issue was raised by the then-mayor of the city. The political party that had promoted Belgrade Waterfront had in the meantime come to power at the national level, whilst Belgrade was still controlled by the opposition. New coalitions were emerging and positions were being consolidated following dramatic changes to the political landscape that followed the 2012 general election. The governing party at the central level launched an all-out campaign to gain power in Belgrade, which the opposition countered by voicing doubts about the financial arrangements for Belgrade Waterfront. The project was becoming a key point of contention between the opposing political forces: the more acrimonious the conflict grew, the more criticism was levelled at the concept. When the party in government not long afterwards finally managed to appoint a caretaker administration to lead the city, it began a massive promotion effort for Belgrade Waterfront. As this political party consolidated its hold on the city, its officials started voicing clearer views about their party's intention to establish direct partnerships between the public sector and investors, as well as to amend



planning and construction legislation. It was at this time that the United Arab Emirates investment was first mooted.

The profession's initial reaction came from experts in tangential areas who used non-governmental organisations as platforms to express their concerns about technical issues facing the project. However, the first major public appearance by experts tasked with implementing the project was made on behalf of an institution whose form was not entirely clear, a group of some twenty people headed by an individual hitherto unknown to any spatial development authority. The statements made on this occasion and actions undertaken by this group were directly opposed to formal planning and decision-making procedures. To this day it is not known who exactly established this institution that represented the project, what its competences were, and what its relationship was with the formal spatial development management system.

In early 2014 the investor for Belgrade Waterfront first became known. It was clearly stated that the government would partner directly with an investor, which the state believed – given the scale of the investment – was entitled to make demands and participate in the development of the project. Some experts from the informal project implementation team began providing more specific information as to the model of the economic relationship between the state and the investor, construction timeframe, and existing and possible professionals who could serve as future partners in the development of the project. However, no serious analysis of the financial commitments this type of agreement entailed were forthcoming; moreover, the actual form of the public-private partnership agreement remained unknown. From a procedural perspective, it was clear that strategic decision-making involved only the ruling political party and one investor. Two facts also became apparent: firstly, that the project was being managed informally by the governing party, bypassing official spatial development institutions and with disregard for statutory procedures; and, secondly, that the investor was making decisions about the spatial development of the site with no interference and according to its own interests. Project documents were drafted by a group established by the governing party without due consideration for procedures mandated by law. This caused the virtual abolishment of the planning function (in its capacity as manager and controller of spatial development), and defeated the purpose of public spatial intervention. This state of affairs was made particularly apparent when the foreign investor brought in a finished project – in the form of computer renderings – from abroad and presented it to the governing party's leadership.

In time, the idea of institutionalising the project gained traction. The first step in this direction was to formalise the project implementation team as a public enterprise of sorts. In parallel with this, it was also suggested that Belgrade Waterfront would be declared a project of national importance. This re-affirmed the relationship with the decision-making process, which was taking place inside a strictly controlled party political organisation and without any collaboration with government authorities. It was clear that options were being sought to bypass statutory procedures, which was initially achieved by co-ordination between bodies tasked with clearing the site in preparation for construction.

It was at this time that the profession's voice was first heard: the president of the national association of architects came forward to claim that Serbian professionals were being unfairly excluded from the project. However, these objections related only to the government's disregard for the profession's views about the project, and not the actual strategic decision-making procedure. The profession, as it transpired, failed to understand that strategic decision-making in spatial planning should be a collaborative process, as practised in democratic societies, but rather saw itself as the sole authority with competence for making such decisions.

In addition to the architects' association, a reputable non-governmental organisation that deals with transparency in decision-making spoke out against the legal basis for the project, citing multiple issues with its institutional arrangements that the public was not acquainted with. This NGO also underlined the importance of safeguarding public interest and compliance with planning and construction legislation. (Figure 2.)

It is important to note that the planning system in force at the time, made up as it was to a large extent of socialist-era procedures and deeply rooted in practice, was neither open to collaborative decision-making in the development of spatial plans, nor recognised investors as legitimate stakeholders. On the contrary: transition, and all of the practical problems associated with it, created a completely erroneous picture of how investors' interests should be treated.

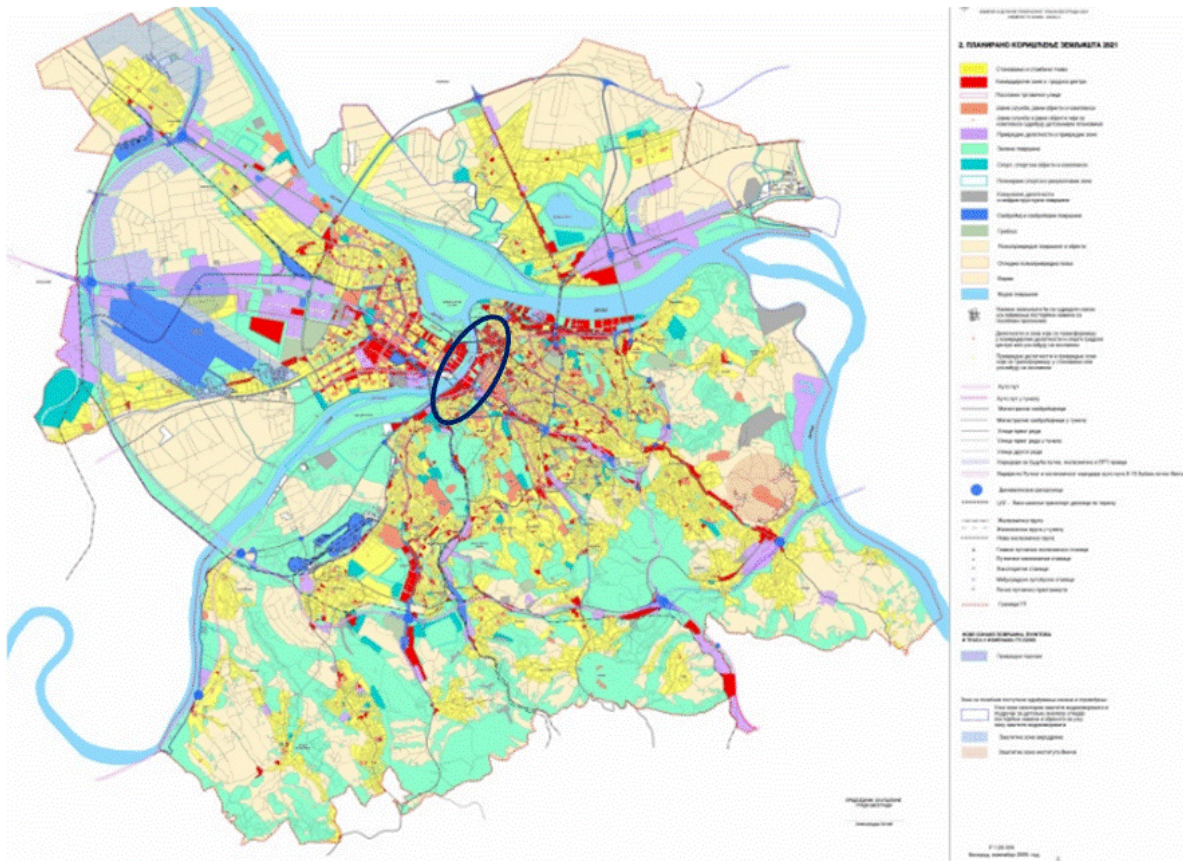


Figure 2. Official Belgrade plan which shows that at the location are planned commercial facilities

## 5.2 Change at the top in the capital – Enter a new mayor (24 April – 31 December 2014)

The governing Progressive Party wished to capitalise on its meteoric rise in popularity following its landslide victory in the 2012 election, so preparations were being made to call a snap poll in the spring of 2014. In view of the major outreach effort involving the project during this period, Belgrade Waterfront was undoubtedly a cornerstone of the party’s campaign aimed at gaining political power at all levels. The national authorities used the election campaign to commence preparatory work on the project, beginning with small-scale clearances on parts of the site to which the state held clear title, and renovate one building – but did not allow public scrutiny of the process.

Immediately after gaining power in the snap general and local election held on 16 March 2014, the ruling party began consolidating and institutionalising Belgrade Waterfront. The first step was to abolish city-level planning studies that posed constraints to the project’s implementation<sup>2</sup>, which was followed by amendments to the city’s Master Plan. The governing party’s majority in the local parliament allowed it to push these changes through. Nothing now stood in the way of the establishment of a Belgrade Waterfront Corporation to formally manage the project, adoption of required urban planning documents, or resolution of title issues. The party’s victory in the snap poll enabled it to replace heads of all government institutions, giving it complete control over decision-making.

At the same time, a group of young professionals-activists, gathered around several non-governmental organisations, first began showing their interest in Belgrade Waterfront. Their engagement was manifested through public panel discussions that experts, mainly architects, were invited to attend. Although these panels proved popular, criticisms levelled at the project remained focused on the exclusion of practitioners from its development, and, in particular, on the disregard shown for public participation in decision-making procedures. Professionals still showed no sign of understanding how collaborative decision-making works

<sup>2</sup> The Belgrade caretaker administration met on 18 April 2014 to repeal the Tall Buildings Study.

and why all stakeholders must participate on equal terms. On the contrary, these comments revealed a great deal of ignorance of the investor's position in strategic decision-making, and were also directed against absolute power concentrated in the hands of a single political party.

On the other hand, Belgrade's new authorities continued making statements in support of the views and intentions they had previously hinted at – that decision-making about the project would involve only the state (or, in this case, the ruling political party) and one investor, to the exclusion of the planning profession and the public, as well as that the planning process was seen as an annoying procedural complication. This thinking showed a lack of understanding of planning as a public intervention and elementary ignorance of democratic decision-making.

Belgrade Waterfront was designated a project of national interest, and planning institutions were ordered to carry out this decision. Legal procedure was bypassed where necessary for the project to be legitimised and legalised. Planning was transformed into an instrument of the ruling party. Professionals with planning institutions attempted to incorporate a minimum of technical knowledge into the project, but there was no room for their involvement in strategic deliberations.

Groups of experts-activists attempted to utilise the modicum of room for civic participation allowed by statutory planning procedures by filing formal complaints against the plans, but their efforts met with crude disregard. The country's highest professional authority then waded into the fray by presenting the government body tasked with the project with an extensive list of objections against the planned design, which however mainly pertained to the technical issues that the project was believed incapable of solving, and the lack of a cost-effectiveness assessment for the project. Interestingly, the International Monetary Fund, in Serbia on a mission of controlling public spending, has also shown interest in the financial aspects of Belgrade Waterfront.

However, although it was officially announced that the planning document for Belgrade Waterfront, which would legally allow construction to begin, was adopted on 31 December 2014 at the highest government level, at the time of writing this paper is yet to be made public.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Serbia's formal planning system did not undergo any major changes in the wake of the country's democratic transition of 2000, which saw it embrace market economy and democracy. Socialist-era practices remained in force, with a centralised government system and spatial policy-making under direct state control, which was only logical since all land was owned by the state. And yet, in the absence of the most basic of preconditions for the new social and economic order – such as regulated private property, taxation policy, transparent procedures and information, legitimacy of multiple interests – the planning system metamorphosed into an arena open to unprincipled and corrupt practices; strategic decision-making became the preserve of powerful stakeholders and their opaque agreements.

Belgrade Waterfront revealed all the problems with the current planning system from the point of view of spatial development policy-making.

- Spatial development decisions were made at the very centre of political power. This became possible after one political party gained absolute power at all levels, which allowed it to control all state institutions, including those tasked with spatial development, which were transformed into instruments used to wield political power.
- The concentration of power in the hands of one party became an efficient means to alter the statutory and institutional framework to serve the party's own interests, and to allow agreements aimed at advertising the authorities' achievements. The absence or weakness of watchdog institutions that could prevent abuse of power also became apparent.
- Underdeveloped democratic consciousness and mechanisms of democratic action allowed decisions about public affairs to be made opaquely by a narrow circle of stakeholders not subject to public scrutiny, and created room for speculation in urban planning procedures.
- The planning profession was caught off guard, unable to pose pertinent questions and understand the situation. It became apparent that planners could not accept all interests as equally legitimate and adjust their behaviour to the realities of the new social and economic order. The profession's lack of

knowledge and capacity to act in a modern context rendered it unable to debate issues outside of a narrowly technical remit. Planners concerned themselves with issues of spatial functionality, technical problems of building the project, construction phases, and costs of developing the site in preparation for such an extensive construction effort. In short, the comments focused on the planned design, rather than on how that design was arrived at.

Belgrade Waterfront has stripped Serbia's planning system and profession of any purpose. In a sense, this project has only revealed the true extent of problems that have been present for decades. Planning professionals are in essence excluded from making strategic or indeed any other decisions, and are reduced to technical executors of decisions reached by the authorities and investors. Planning has become a mere formality, as the planning profession has remained cocooned in an obsolete social and economic environment and unable to learn new strategies that could allow it to consider issues thoroughly and react to them appropriately.

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