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Belgrade Waterfront: when Sultanism enters city planning

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*Belgrade Waterfront – Beograd na Vodi: top-notch urban design or glossy but shady façade? Two young urbanists, **Jorn Koelemaj** and **Barend Wind**, take us through the many layers of this controversial project. This blog post has been kindly provided by The ProtoCity as part of a blog exchange. You can read LSEE's contribution to ProtoCity, "Brand Old Skopje", [here](#).*

Serbia's capital Belgrade is about to become an integral part of the glitzy scene of 'world cities' as soon as its new [Waterfront](#) development will be established in 2019. At least, this is what the project's founding father, prime minister Aleksandar Vučić, seems to be convinced of. The media report that his personal contacts account for 3 billion euros of Arab investments in this project. Many active citizens are sceptical and wonder whether the project will ever be realized and what its actual costs will be. What is behind this remarkable urban mega-project?



The Belgrade Waterfront Gallery/ 3D Model presented at the '1905 Belgrade'. Photo: Jorn Koelemaj

Since the 1980s, deindustrialisation urged many Western cities to reinvent themselves. Revitalising formerly industrial waterfronts is one of the ways in which policy makers of the world's biggest cities are trying to turn their cities into successful cognitive-cultural economies. Public-private ventures are set up to transform polluted, abandoned areas into attractive spots combining work, living space and leisure. Examples of these practices are to be found worldwide – from Baltimore to Toronto, Amsterdam, London, Edinburgh and Mumbai. Notwithstanding general criticisms on such policies of city refurbishment, which often aims to desperately attract global capital firms and skilful workers, one could regard some waterfront projects more successful than others. Can we soon add Belgrade to the list of best practices? A look at early impressions of Belgrade Waterfront shows that the city's plans are ambitious: the highest tower and the biggest shopping mall of South East Europe are the main eye catchers, surrounded by a park as well as numerous high rise buildings, lush offices, hotels and luxury apartments. However, the Belgrade Waterfront is fundamentally different from its Western counterparts. It is planned in a country with one of Europe's lowest standards of living, known for having a strongly clientelistic political system.

A capital that needs to reinvent itself

After a period of economic troubles and years of civil war, ended by the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999, the city was in great need to reinvent itself. Belgrade (2,5 million inhabitants) had been the capital of Yugoslavia since its inception, and it now

lost much of its hinterland as a result of the federation's breakup. Many companies went bankrupt or scaled down their business to Serbia and as a result Zagreb took over Belgrade's role as the primary financial centre of the Balkans. In recent times, Belgrade increasingly managed to take up its role of regional capital again. Its attractiveness as a financial stronghold increases. Travel guide Lonely Planet rated the city among the world's [ultimate party cities](#), and some of the nineteenth century neighbourhoods are gradually gentrifying due to the influx of higher educated youngsters. However, Belgrade remains a poor city with low housing quality, a large number of vacant buildings due to undefined property rights and a largely developed grey economy. Since the housing on the market is unaffordable, most households acquire shelter via the grey market or the family.



The site along the Sava River that is destined for the Belgrade Waterfront development. Photo: Jörn Koelemaj

Urban design or glossy façade?

At first glance, a three billion euro – “Belgrade Waterfront” project does not quite seem to fit the urban-economic context of Belgrade, let alone the urgent needs and demands of its citizens. It is not clear how luxury apartments (with an average price of 400.000 Euro) will be attractive for a cross-section of the city's current population. While this apparent mismatch could perhaps be defended by framing the project as a unique opportunity to boost the city's development, none of this is used to legitimise the project. Underlying studies and urban plans are simply lacking. The model that's being presented is nothing more than a mere graphical visualisation. The riverside spot on which the project should arise, which has been inspiring politicians with ambitious renewal plans for decades already, consists of old railway tracks and small businesses. The developers involved with the current project apparently seem to consider this zone – and along with it the whole cityscape of Belgrade – as *tabula rasa* that can be built upon without any constraints. Examining the glossy [impressions](#) of the presented model, it is moreover remarkable that the existing city of Belgrade in the background seems to radically change along with the Waterfront developments: the view from the Belgrade fortress, with its steep slopes and unusual perspectives, is going to be dramatically altered. The same holds true for existing historical houses from the Austro-Hungarian era, which would suddenly be enclosed with plenty of modern high rise structures, without any contextual references. This raises many questions about the appropriateness of Belgrade Waterfront within the central urban tissue of the City of Belgrade. To what extent will it be integrated, also in terms of reachability? All in all, it seems that Belgrade Waterfront currently still consists of an image rather than an actual urban development plan. Fancy-looking skyscrapers are certainly not a guarantee for sufficient urban development.



Belgrade's existing railways that lead to the main railway station will be relocated. Photo: Jorn Koelemaij

Arab influence

Do the responsible policy makers in Belgrade actually believe that the Waterfront development will be a “game changer” for the future of Serbia? Many suggest that there are other mechanisms at play in Serbia’s political economy that make the realisation of this project of crucial importance. These speculations seem plausible, although it proves to be very difficult to demonstrate the (geo-) political power games that lie behind it. Interestingly, the plans for Belgrade’s waterfront are interwoven with Prime Minister Vučić’s career. When he ran for mayor in 2008, he announced his plans for the redevelopment of the railway site right on the waterfront. The first concrete visions for this very area came up in the 2012 political campaign. Vučić claimed that no public money would be spent on this development and his friendship with Abu Dhabi sheikh Mohammed is given as explanation behind this private investment promise of 3 billion dollars. The personal contacts of the Prime Minister already resulted in large investments in [a semiconductor factory, a lending programme for farmers, and an aircraft-component plant](#). Furthermore, the United Arab Emirates bought a significant stake of Serbia’s airline (creating Air Serbia), a vast amount of Serbian agricultural land, and are now investing to develop Serbia’s army industry, some say, to be able to [distribute weapons across the Middle East](#). The real motives behind Serbia’s political elite as well as the Emirati investors’ actions regarding Belgrade Waterfront are thus still unclear.

Lack of transparency

As the story unfolded, it appeared that all of a sudden a [deal had been struck](#) which implied that the city council of Belgrade will provide the necessary infrastructure for the plan (estimated costs: one billion dollar), while a private Emirates-based firm ([Eagle Hills](#)) will generate the construction of the buildings out of the plan. Public spending on the project is not being taken in consideration in the public sphere and citizens are not really informed about the whole deal. Neither the agreements nor the parties’ obligations are transparent: it is unclear whether it is possible for Eagle Hills to withdraw from the project, which would leave the city with large financial debts. It is also unclear how much public money will exactly be engaged, and how possible revenues will benefit the citizens of Serbia. These questions [worry a section of Belgrade citizens](#), but many are left indifferent since they doubt whether the Waterfront will actually be built. Although the planning process seems to be highly insecure, stakes are high for the political elite. Under the header of a ‘project of national interest’, existing legislations and planning policies are being changed to facilitate the realisation of the project. Furthermore, mainstream political parties avoid discussing the initiative. The government decided to realise the project via the emirates-based firm, without any public tender or procedure. “The rules of this game are unknown” and “they are legalising wild-planning” are examples of remarks that we often heard during the interviews we conducted when we were in Belgrade. Why are fundamental planning conditions changed to attract such a high risk investment? While daily life is harsh for many, for the politicians a mega project of this kind is an attractive way of showing vigour and optimism. This utopian urbanism enrages many Serbs, worried about the consequences of global speculation.

Civic participation, which is widely advocated among urban planners and academics in the Western world nowadays, is thus lacking – or even blocked – in Serbia. There are citizens movements, like [Ne da\(vi\)mo Beograd](#), that raise important questions, while engaging media, experts, planners and NGOs. In times of rapidly changing visions for the city’s development, they have organized several panel discussions, debates and performances raising attention on the highly problematic background of the Waterfront project. At the same time, they are generating alternative solutions. These are confronting the current government’s surreal visual show-offs, aspiring to engage both general and professional public toward more participatory thinking and inclusive engagement. Unfortunately, in contemporary Serbia, the logic of showing off with prestige projects wins from a socially and economically just spatial development. For Prime Minister Vučić, it is about time to shed full light on the financial implications of his urban dream to the people of Serbia. Without accountability, Belgrade’s Waterfront is nothing more than a Sultans’ fantasy. One that can possibly take citizens of Serbia into a long-lasting debt bondage.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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