

Human Security Chronicle: Belgrade Waterfront – from vision to insecurity

From a promising project to questions of accountability and decision making in Serbia: Do decision makers ask people for their opinion? Do citizens have a say in the development and planning of public space? Can owners be forcefully removed from their homes? Are citizens of Serbia aware of their own influence? Are citizens threatened by large scale development projects such as Belgrade Waterfront?

- Vučić: "Belgrade Waterfront" it's not a fairytale – B92 (10.3.2014)¹
- Activists interrupt Belgrade Assembly session of – Kontra Press (19.9.2014)²
- Vučić: 2,000 apartments in the "Belgrade Waterfront" complex will be sold on the first day – Blic (3.3.2014)³
- "Belgrade Waterfront" session interrupted by activists of initiative "Do not smother Belgrade" with songs - Blic (5.11.2014)⁴
- Debate: What lies beneath the surface of "Belgrade Waterfront" – Slobodna Evropa (10.11.2014)⁵
- There is no conclusion, while the general urbanistic plan is changing – Istinomer (23.07.2014.)⁶

‘Sava Mala’, a quarter in the city center of Belgrade next to the river Sava, represents a disorganized space partly jammed with old housing complexes and partly unused space of old railways and industrial complexes. It is considered an underdeveloped and unutilized space in the city, currently regarded as the ‘black hole of Belgrade’, although one part of the area has recently developed into an artistic bohemian quarter. Numerous politicians and developers have tried to rebuild this part of city for decades, but each attempt unfortunately failed either due to lack of funds or changing political climate. For instance, although "Evropolis" was presented to the

1 B92: http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/srbija.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=10&nav_id=822021 (13.11.2014).

2 Kontrapress: <http://www.kontrapress.com/clanak.php?rub=GRADovanje&url=Aktivisti-prekinuli-sednicu-Skupstine-Beograda> (13.11.2014).

3 Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/446994/Vucic-Prvog-dana-bice-prodato-2000-apartmana-u-kompleksu-Beograd-na-vodi> (13.11.2014).

4 Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Beograd/508738/Aktivisti-inicijative-Ne-davimo-Beograd-slaufovima-i-pesmom-ometali-sednicu-o-Beogradu-na-vodi> (13.11.2014).

5 Slobodnaevropa: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/tribina-sta-se-krije-ispod-povrsine-beograda-na-vodi/26653357.html> (13.11.2014).

6 Istinomer: <http://www.istinomer.rs/stav/analize/zakljucka-nema-a-gup-se-menja/> (13.11.2014).

public 1996 it was never realized. Still, this part of the city is today considered as one of the most attractive properties in Belgrade.

Historically, this district is one of the oldest and most important in the city of Belgrade. It has one of the oldest authentic houses in Belgrade, the Manak's House which has been converted into a museum and its residents are largely indigenous and maintain the authenticity of the old Belgrade lifestyle. You can therefore still find neighbors sitting in the courtyards of small terrestrial run-down house drinking coffee. Furthermore, a large number of small and abandoned houses were eventually occupied by artists creating many galleries in the neighborhood. At the same time, other abandoned houses were leased by owners of bars and nightclubs which made this part of the city an attractive center for nightlife. In addition to these new development, the central stations for both the bus and railway are located in the district, as well as an old commercial zone with many small stores and old craft shops Balkanska Street and Sarajevska Street. Hence, although a large part of the district is highly underdeveloped, the district still has an important history while new development are making it an attractive part of the city.

In spite of these characteristics, the new government in Serbia started at the beginning of 2013, to create plans that would completely transform this area and called the project 'Belgrade Waterfront'. 'Belgrade on Water', as it is also called, was first time presented to the public in January 2014. The financial plan for this development was presented by a foreign investor from Dubai who committed to investing 3 billion \$ while the government would invest 66 million euros in the form of land property which would be cleared and ceded by the investor at the end of the project. The government is promoting the program as a unique opportunity that will bring great benefits to the district, Belgrade and Serbia. Most notably, they insist that the project will be highly cost-effectiveness and contribute to economic development - a large number of people would be employed in the construction, it will create a shopping and business center, and in the end, it will attract new investors and a large number of tourists. In the way the government argues that the profitability will be very high given the limited investment the government itself has to make.

Soon after this presentation, the project was approved, but not without a public outcry. Many gathered to oppose this large-scale project due to its lack of transparency, economic and environmental risks, spatial disadvantages, and overall 'violence' against the city.

Risks and insecurities related to Belgrade Waterfront

➤ Lack of transparency and inclusion

One of the main critics of the opposition towards Belgrade Waterfront is the lack of transparency of the whole process. Most notably, very little information about the project, which is ultimately framed as public good, has been made available to the public. Information presented to the public has been highly fractured, inconsistent and in many cases insufficient. Some of the information missing includes: the authors/developers of the project, the legal property division,

and the responsibilities of the state and investors. When one CSO started to dig into the project and asked for insight into various contracts the government and investors, they were met with resistance. They were not able to gain all the information that they have a legal right to and that is of public relevance. Apart from this overall lack of participatory planning and transparency, the citizen's voice has also been disregarded in the decision-making realism. For instance, the Planning Commission responsible for local planning received over 1.2000 objections to the project from citizens, professional associations and institutions. However, the Commission still adopted a new General Urban Plan which supports Belgrade Waterfront in September of 2014 declaring all 1.200 objections as unfounded. This lack of transparency and inclusion, has created doubt about the overall legitimacy of the initiative.

➤ **Economic risks:**

In addition to lack of transparency, experts point to several economic risks which can cause considerable harms and that are a threat to both individuals' living in the area, as well as the wider public in Serbia. Some of the risks identified include:

- The project only has one investor which makes it highly dependable and increases risks if the investor should make any changes or become financially unstable.
- Although developers promise an increase in employment due to the new investment, these jobs are mostly low-paid jobs in construction and services that are only on short-term basis.
- Since the large land property were Belgrade Waterfront will be built will be made available to long-term lease to private companies without or with very little compensation, that value of the land might be lost with little benefit to the citizens themselves.⁷
- There is a risk of creating a 'ghost town' due to the unsustainability of the project. In this way, the space will remain empty while its maintenance will be on the state budget.⁸
- The cost-benefit analysis of moving the railway and bus station remain unanswered, creating a skepticism towards the profitability of this move.

Overall, critics argue that the socio-economic effects of the project have either not been assessed or not been qualitatively assessed, especially in relation to state costs.

➤ **Segregation and social exclusion**

The urban plan for Belgrade Waterfront also poses several risks related to segregation and social inclusion in Belgrade. Namely, the project envisages construction of luxury residential areas which will not be suited for the current socio-economic demographic of the people living in the area. It is in this way still unclear what will happen to the homeowners in this area and

⁷ Pescanik – open letter: <http://pescanik.net/otvoreno-pismo-gradanima-beograda/> (13.11.2014.)

⁸ Slobodna Evropa: <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/tribina-sta-se-krije-ispod-povrsine-beograda-na-vodi/26653357.html> (13.11.2014.)

whether or not they will be dislocate or if some form of housing will be available to them on the same location. In the latter case, the affordability of living in this new environment is questionable and they might not be sustainable. The plan is to build residential and commercial buildings which are not responding to the current social, economic, and cultural diversity of the district. This kind of spatial construction neglects local needs of housing and work and offers a very limited range of options for production and consumption. In fact, it leads to creation of so-called 'forbidden cities' with enclosed spaces which are not accessible to the general population. In this way, the historical and cultural richness of the district will be lost which is inextricably linked to its people and culture.⁹

➤ **Ecological consequences**

Lastly, one of the main critics of the project is that an environmental sustainability assessment of has not been conducted, or at least, that this assessment is not available to the general public. Since the Sava coastal areas prone to flooding, experts say it makes no sense to build along the banks of the river. They argue that carefully examination of the preparedness and adaptability of the field is necessary before any such plans are made. This is also closely related with the plan to create a high-rise tower which would partly be built into the river Sava and thereby possible change the river flow, while the planned bridge over the river would hinder boat traffic and international agreements regarding river navigation. Furthermore, environmental experts also stress the dangers related to building at the coast as it can destroy the local ecology, displace local inhabitants, and destroy open public spaces such as access to the river.¹⁰

Spatial Planning and Human Security

If we look at this project in human security terms, we can see how closely related human security and spatial planning can be. It can pose grave threats and insecurities to both individuals, communities, and possible the country at large.

In relation to Belgrade Waterfront, one of the main forms of insecurity is institutional insecurity and the inability of citizens to influence to institutions and decision-makers. As mentioned above, citizens tried to gain information about the project, they tried to submit comments on the available documents, but their voices were not heard. Although there is an overall unwillingness of state institutions to share information of public interest, they are promoting the project through large-scale media campaigns. Posters, build boards, commercials, are just some of the media tools used to present this project to the public. However, they are only presenting selected sources of material, that is, the information which is in the interest of the investors and the state,

⁹ Peščanik: <http://pescanik.net/otvoreno-pismo-gradanima-beograda/> (13.11.2014.)

¹⁰ <http://pescanik.net/otvoreno-pismo-gradanima-beograda/>

rather than the public. The other side of the coin, the insecurity of the people and community, are not visible in the public domain. In turn, this creates an overall lack of security in the proposed plans and people feel threatened by the future. Lack of assessment of risks (or availability of such assessment), also creates a fear of other human security risks such as economic, ecological and community insecurity, and thereby questions the legitimacy of the project.

In addition to this lack of assessment, there is also a larger question of social engineering. This is a term that James Scott used in his book “Seeing like a State” to explain large-scale projects which try to govern social behavior and social relations.¹¹ Similar to the case of Belgrade Waterfront, other mega projects have often resulted in insecurity when trying to construe new environments through a top-down approach to planning. He argues that although scientific knowledge is important when planning it is also important to take into account when planning, it is also important to pay attention to what the Greeks call *metis*, which can be explained as feeling or felt experience of people. Only by taking these aspects into account, can new development projects and re-organizations be successful. Ignoring the individual and only relying on plans developed in disconnect with the community will most often fail and lead to insecurity rather than sustainability and security.



11 Scott, J.C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. US: Yale University Press.