

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

# perspectives

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## SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

### Right to the City





## Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Fostering democracy and upholding human rights, taking action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advancing equality between women and men, securing peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defending the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power – these are the objectives that drive the ideas and actions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. We maintain close ties to the German Green Party (Alliance 90/The Greens) and as a think tank for green visions and projects, we are part of an international network encompassing well over 100 partner projects in approximately 60 countries.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation works independently and nurtures a spirit of intellectual openness. We maintain a worldwide network with currently 30 international offices. Our work in Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo concentrates on the democratization process, political education, and environmental protection and sustainable development. We support and open public fora about topical and marginalized social-political issues and we enable networking of local and international actors close to the Green values.

# Editorial

## What does it mean to be a Citizen?

By Jovana Gligorijević

It seems as though the term citizen does not need a specific explanation. It is an inhabitant of a certain country or a city, a person with legally recognized citizenship, who pays taxes and fulfills their obligations to the community, and enjoys certain rights in return. But how often is that really the case? How many citizens in the world can say that they are true citizens according to this definition? Given the current global situation, not many. In this issue of “Perspectives”, our focus is on citizens and cities in the Western Balkans.

What we are dealing with here, in the Western Balkans, in South Eastern Europe, in the former-Yugoslavia, in the Adriatic region (so many names for such a small part of the world) is a transitional process from formerly communist countries to modern democracies, post-war societies, with high unemployment rates, poverty, and inequalities on every imaginable level... There is also a serious crisis of the rule of law in almost every Balkan country, “spiced” with a high level of corruption. The boiling atmosphere has grown even tenser due to the refugee crisis, from which the Balkans have not escaped untouched.

Additionally, we are witnessing a relatively new global phenomenon, in which Balkan countries are trend-setters: In the Balkans we have a whole cadre of democratically elected leaders who are characterized by serious elements of autocracy. The “free world” never seriously discussed, or even noticed, this phenomenon of elected autocrats before late 2016, when Donald Trump became the democratically elected president of the United States of America. Here in Balkans, while watching the news from the USA, all one can think is “we have already seen this”. Or, as Slavoj Žižek would say, “we’re coming from your future”.

Luckily for the rest of the world, our leaders do not have the great power that the POTUS does. They have no influence on global issues, no means to start wars, or prevent hundreds of thousands of people entering their countries... But, unfortunately for Balkan societies, they do have their small yards in which they can do whatever they want. They can make unconstitutional laws that allow them to interrupt and privatize public properties. They can limit freedom of expression or violently stop public (and most often peaceful) protests by those who disagree with their politics.

Late in January 2017, the American edition of Newsweek published an interesting analysis of Balkan leaders, in order to explain the Trump phenomenon. In an opinion article titled “Why resurgent Balkan populism could prove more dangerous than Donald Trump”, the author, Nicholas Kaufmann, describes the political mechanisms at play in the Balkans. Although he focuses on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, everything that he writes about that country’s political leaders could easily be applied to those of Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, or Kosovo. According to Kaufmann, throughout the region leaders have been employing populist strategies for years in order to sideline inconvenient institutions and maintain their grip on power. Kaufmann writes that “this

strain of populist politics feeds from a symbolic construction of the real people, meant to instill a sense of common identity and whose singular voice is represented in one strong leader. This supposed authority the leader gets from representing the real people trumps all other sources of legitimate political authority, be it constitutional court, head of state, parliament, or local and state government.”

But what has this got to do with the real meaning of the term “citizen”? Well, it turns out that the definition we offered above does not apply any more. It is far from being so simple. “Citizen” has become a political term, a word that designates much more than a plain “tax payer with a legally recognized place of residence”. The new definition of citizen must be more proactive, more political, and must include a certain level of activism.

Why do we need a new definition of “citizen”? Because here, in the Balkans, we have lived through several decades of continued attempts by those in power to deny or reduce the civic rights of citizens. Nowadays, keeping the status of citizen actually means a constant fight for personal dignity, the common good and the best interests of the public. The days when you could simply be a citizen are far behind us – now it is a day-to-day fight to defend that status, defending our own right to the city.

Although many activist groups, especially in Serbia, choose the “right to the city” as their slogan, the phrase actually has quite a long history. It was first proposed by the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la ville*. He defined the right to the city as a demand for a transformed and renewed access to urban life.

The slogan has evolved throughout the decades. One of the world’s most cited authors of humanities and social science books, the British anthropologist David Harvey, has described the right to the city as “far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights”.

Let’s try to define a citizen as one who has an undeniable right to the city. Then, let’s read Harvey’s words once more and highlight the most important points: “common rather than an individual”, “exercise of a collective power”, “most neglected of our human rights”. From this new point of view, the term “citizen” means so much more than the sterile, bureaucratic definition we started with. By introducing the slogan “right to the city”, we breathe life into the dead and empty idea of “citizen”. Now it is vivid. Now we can imagine real “flesh and blood” people, with their lives, needs and day-to-day fights.

On the forthcoming pages of this issue of Perspectives, you will find many stories written by citizens in the true meaning of that word. They describe what the “right for the city” means to them, why they perceive their activism as fighting for a common rather than an individual right, and why they choose to fight for one of the most precious yet most neglected of human rights. But their stories are even more than that: reading them, one learns so much about the perfidious ways those in power limit people’s right to the city.

You will read about their efforts to gain and defend their right to the city by standing up to those in power, whether that means defending a single park, a piece of coastline, a cycle path, or riskier fights against corrupted systems that exploit the common good for vested financial interests. Most of those fights are still in progress, and some of them already seem to have been lost. But the important thing is that the people whose stories you are about to read have not given up. Because giving up is not something that real citizens do.

Although it was not our primary intention, the testimonies presented in this issue of Perspectives has turned out to be a sort of manual from which one can learn everything there is to know about the subtle and refined methods of the presidents, prime ministers and even mayors of Balkan Countries, whose hidden agenda is nothing less than to conquer people and rob citizens of their essence. In front of you there are stories of people who fulfill their obligations, but they do not get rights in return. That is why they have to fight for their rights. Especially their right to the city. ■■■

# TINA, Go Home! The Commons are Here\*

By Vedran Horvat

Over the last decade, the countries of South Eastern Europe have been subject to an increasingly powerful wave of commodification, privatisation, and expropriation of natural and public resources. While most of the governments in this region supported this trend, in which European integration was often instrumentalised to serve the interests of private companies, more and more citizens have gradually become aware of the vast and deep devastation to existing ecological and social systems, leading to less just and equal societies.

From the megalomaniac golf project on Dubrovnik's Srd Mountain, to the colossal and eye-wateringly expensive Belgrade waterfront; from the conflict over the communist monuments in Budapest's Freedom Square, to investments in hydro power plants in Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous examples illustrate this destructive 'developmentalist' trajectory. Apart from the evident pressure on urban public spaces and natural resources, some of these projects are rooted in an extractivist logic of natural exploitation which can also be seen in the oil drilling in the Adriatic Sea, the Roşia Montană mining project in Romania, and plans for new coal power plants in some of these countries. Additionally, these projects are often directed against public infrastructure, as in the attempted privatisation of Croatia's highways, which failed due to mass mobilisations by an alliance of civil society organisations and trade unions.

## Varšavska: A blueprint for resistance across borders

This wave of increasing pressure on the people and nature of these ecosystems started a decade ago. One of the most telling cases in the region was the 'Cvjetni prolaz' project in the centre of Zagreb, which aimed to expropriate both public funds and

public space for the benefit of a private and profit-oriented real estate project. The campaign against the project ("Ne damo Varšavsku") mobilised many Zagreb citizens, who denounced high level clientelism, corruption and pressure on public urban spaces, geared more towards car transport and luxurious housing, at the expense of public usage of space. The struggle, which lasted almost five years, was crucial in the forming of social movements and in shaping a political agenda that challenged the rules of the neoliberal agenda. When much larger-scale projects, such as the Belgrade Waterfront and Dubrovnik golf playground emerged, the experiences from Varšavska were instrumental in forming a first wave of resistance that extended across borders. The same logic of expropriation, plunder and extraction – often using the public budget and overriding local authorities' objections - underlies these and other cases in the region.

These projects were merely manifestations of a first wave of the neoliberal expansionist agenda that has emerged in ex-Yugoslavia countries after an initial wave of wild privatisations in the 1990s, in which most of the preconditions for sustainable industry disappeared. While that decade saw sustainable industrial policy and decent work conditions destroyed, the following years witnessed unprecedented attacks on natural resources and public infrastruc-

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ture by speculative financial markets and megalomaniac investments.

These days, the political economy of South Eastern Europe (SEE) is heavily marked by the financialisation and expropriation of the 'public' and 'social' in favour of the private. Noted as residua of the past system, institutions of social ownership and investments in public ownership (primarily related to infrastructure) are undermined by a variety of non-transparent and usurping manoeuvres of privatisation, tolerated for the sake of the transition to a market economy. Since these have been deepening social inequalities and eroding living standards, which were already deteriorating due to austerity measures and the dissolution of the social welfare system inherited from Yugoslavia, it became clear that political strategies were needed to counter these developments.

### Different shades of plunder

Although many of the strategies behind the struggles had limited success, they were, more importantly, vital in shaping a new generation of social movements. Moreover, they proved that the arguments used by these movements expressed the views of citizens, and not those of the institutions captured by political or corporate power. Furthermore, they were openly opposed to the further suspension of democratic instruments in certain countries that often appeared to be coupled with top down economic constitutionalism imposed by international financial institutions.

All the resistance movements and struggles across ex-Yugoslavia and beyond shared at least two common points. The first was a clear opposition to corruption, conflicts of interest, the usurpation of public functions, and, more generally, to the various types of plunder legalised or justified through a variety of arrangements, in which the public interest was not protected and the state had served private interests while undermining the prospects of a decent life for future generations. It was a rebellion against a hijacked future, malfunctioning governance, and an establishment that used a toxic mixture of austerity and public-private arrangements to generate short term profits for the political cast while leaving citizens with huge debts. In many of these cases, citizens were caught between bad governance of public property on one side and aggressive privatisation on the other.

These also have severe political implications in cases of private-public partner-

ships, where political elites use their privileges to expropriate resources of public value (often strengthening their social and economic status as a result) while leaving behind huge debts and risks linked to unsustainable projects. This systemic pattern was repeated countless times in the region, with the results impoverishing citizens and diminishing their capacity for political activity.

### The emergence of a commons narrative

While discontent and anti-establishment politics were the logical consequences of such behaviour, there were other, more intellectual and constructive, implications that led to a recognition of common aspects. Most of these struggles shared, at their starting points, a very general and vague idea about care and concern for common goods, linked to ideas of safeguarding public interest, prevention of privatisation or devastation, and a demand for a different, generally more democratic governance. However, gradually a narrative on the commons began to emerge, although as a work in the progress at both the theoretical and practical levels across Europe, which contained both motivating and mobilising power and which, at its core, went beyond the ideology-infused false dichotomy between the state and the market. Part of the power of the commons lay in its promise to mobilise and organise society around the principles of sustainability, equity, and collective control at all layers of governance.

More specifically, on the one hand, in some Western European countries, the commons usually present a model to escape the determination of either the state or market for communities and individuals that aim to create and maintain their alternative universe outside of politics. In South Eastern Europe, on the other hand, it appears that the commons are (particularly in the first phase) spaces of confrontation, since they disrupt existing divisions of power and penetrate into the political territory of the state at local or national level. The idea of the commons shared by movements and initiatives across the region therefore resonated with those who recognised that the vacuum between the limited powers of the state and the emerging powers of the market can be filled by those forces that will demand a deep transformation of the governance regime in the direction of

more egalitarian and sustainable societies. This was not about escaping political realities through the creation of alternative governance models in their neighbourhoods but, on the contrary, about applying these principles to the governance of public goods and the commons. Despite not being a political alternative at first glance, they are heralds of forthcoming political alternatives that can transcend state/market dichotomies and constitute a societal counter-power, which is challenging the ‘business as usual’ approach. Eventually, with the commons as one of the core ingredients and drivers of social change, we might see an end to Thatcher’s famous ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA) which, decades after it was first coined, is now being sold across the European periphery.

### Progressive peripheries protecting people

Since the 2008 crisis unfolded and with it striking power inequalities (when private banks’ losses were socialised, compensated by public funds), the notion of a mythical journey of transition to a market economy as we knew it faded away, even in countries of South Eastern Europe. The region has remained almost in another time zone, exposed to violent acts of modernisation mediated through debt increases and further pauperisation. In order to grow, which remains a mainstream imperative across the region, investments are needed which are then accepted through a fast track procedure without public consultation. Very often, local elites play the role of middlemen for their own interests, burdening future generations, threatening their life conditions, their access to resources, and the public budgets in which there will be fewer and fewer funds for education, health or housing, due to debt and interest repayments. In reality, investments in all these cases were not meant to improve the living conditions of communities but to increase consumption or to mirror the social inequalities through the creation of luxurious zones. Under pressure, local proponents of the neoliberal agenda are pushing forward with their systemic plunder and privatising of the remaining natural resources and public infrastructure.

In such a context, the commons both as a concept and as a practice resonates not only with the limited but valuable experience of self-management during the Yugoslavian era (common to most of the countries in SEE) but also with the perception

of a new and fresh alternative which challenges the false choice between privatisation on one side and the usurpation of public goods on the other. Although an unfinished theory, the commons appears to be a core idea of reclaiming fundamental goods and democratic processes and spaces needed for ensuring equal access and distribution. As such they are able to stake out a political ground in which people will be protected, thus challenging state capture in this corner of Europe.

However, achieving this might not be so easy, as the struggle neither begins nor ends in the SEE region alone. Whilst the citizens of Western Europe have been exposed to TINA for at least a few decades, the South Eastern side has only witnessed these patterns in the last decade. TINA was often smuggled in through modernisation agendas which aimed to convince the authorities that they needed some sort of investments in order to liberalise the market or modernise certain sectors to “catch up with global markets”. In this sense, the neoliberal expansionist agenda has used both the “rule of law” and the “right to development” to justify their profit-seeking orientation, in opposition to sustainability, fair access, and community-led control or democratic rules. All the aforementioned cases, along with many others, share a common neglect for the local community, the achievement of modern urbanity, and the abuse of public interest. Not surprisingly, the magnetic power of such arrangements has forced governments in the region to compete to attract strategic investments and amend their legislation to fit all demands, often legalising or even institutionalising plunder in the process (most of the countries in the region have introduced special Laws on strategic investments which were in some cases anti-constitutional, discriminatory or anti-democratic).

In this way, both people and resources in the region were exposed to unregulated markets in which they were pitted against one another, chanting the mantra of free economy, while at the same time leaving behind the abundant potential for cooperation that existed in a region that was torn apart by nationalists’ agendas in ‘90s. This was not only down to markets; governments and societies also played their part in this race to the bottom. The commons present principles that bring back collaboration and local production to the region, and show the way to avoid the detrimental patterns of the capitalist societies of Western Europe, while restoring trust and capacities for social reproduction. They also present a



claim for community and new citizenship that goes beyond national, religious, racial, gendered, and cultural definitions.

In this context, the notion of European integration was widely abused to undermine the rule of law and basic human rights protection standards, whilst at the same time preparing the ground for justifying unpopular – but now legal – manoeuvres of government that will open to the door to liberalisation. Liberal constitutionalism has therefore proven to be an insufficient instrument for the protection of citizen rights, whereas the commons appears to counter the continuity of plunder that manifests itself through systemic attacks on labour and on nature, further decreasing quality of life. In this context, coming back to the idea of the commons and its collaborative principles seems to be not only subversive, but also to represent an act of non-compliance and disobedience in the face of these rules of economic behaviour.

### A bottom-up push against the race to the bottom

The commons holds a distinctive political significance for many progressive social forces in the region, which, through their demands for social control of resources, constitute a counter-power and mobilise citizens, thereby also transforming governance structures and social relations that sustain business as usual of privatisation and commodification. Looking at some struggles, such as in Zagreb, Pula, or Belgrade, which directly opposed the commodification of public and natural resources, the commons in that sense might precipitate the next wave of democratisation to fill the vacuum between state and market. In this case, the commons appears to be both formative and instrumental in establishing political powers aiming at social transformation in line with principles of sustainability and equality. The next steps would be to envision a new institutional architecture with distinctive organisational cultures, rules and customs that would ensure collective control, fair access, and deeply embedded democratic principles in governance models.

While financialisation and further neoliberal expansion in the region of SEE represent just another building block in the continuity of plunder, the current political momentum or shift to the right across the Europe indicates that capital is mobilising right wing forces to protect business as usual and even deepen the inequality gap.

This slide into authoritarianism has to be challenged by a radical opposition rooted in social power that calls for radical democratisation of the state through the principle of the commons and against the suspensions of democracy and rights introduced to defend capitalistic institutions against demands for redistribution and equity. One of the strengths of the commons is that it provides private property alternatives, going beyond the public and private binary. This prevents us into falling into the ideological trap that commons go against private property, since there are more and more cases where private property can be instrumental in protecting some of the cultural or natural commons – with fair access, social control, and sustainable use as a basic criteria.

Moreover, the commons can be identified as a promising driver of change in this part of Europe due to specific circumstances and historic trajectories. The notion resonates deeply with a legacy of experimental self-management during the Yugoslavia era, and with the traditional management of natural and cultural commons that had previously maintained ecosystems and communities for centuries. Paired with more recent notions of urban and digital commons, the story of the commons offers an almost complete and radical re-organisation of conditions for the reproduction of life and society, particularly of labour and nature. The commons are, to large extent, already rooted in societies and therefore appear as a logical narrative during struggles, but also as a foundation for building new ecosystems of governance and institutional architecture. While they are obviously final the frontier of social reproduction, new momentum lies in their political and social mobilisation and their transfer to the institutional and governance field.

For all its limits and the debates it triggers (particularly in relation to scale), the commons might still be a concept fit for the future. It challenges current unsustainable and dehumanising patterns of distribution, production, and consumption, and demands the transformation and diversification of governance regimes. After all, it appears to be an important platform to bring together the political forces that challenge the shortcomings of the investment-oriented model that is re-directing growth from local people towards financial markets. Institutions of collective work and collective action created in '70s Yugoslavia appear to be worth revisiting and upgrading in a bid to create a new institutional architecture. ■■■

# Belgrade Waterfront: Fight for the City

By Dobrica Veselinović

Sitting on the confluence of two large rivers, such as the Sava and Danube, is a rare and precious position for a capital city. It sounds like a dream for many developed cities in the world. But sometimes, in certain parts of world, a dream can become a nightmare. The Sava riverside is an attractive location in the Serbian capital. It is at the heart of the city, easy to approach on foot, by car or bicycle. Given its position at the centre of the city, it is no surprise that through the decades various techno-bureaucratic elites have showed interest in this location.

The various purposes that these elites imagined for the riverside reflected the political, economic and cultural climate in Yugoslavia and the states formed after its collapse. The Sava Amphitheatre gained its central position in the city with the development of New Belgrade on the northern side of the river after Second World War. Its future was for decades dependent on the costly and complex demands of building on the high water table around the river and tied to the untangling of the largest infrastructural Gordian knot in Belgrade, which includes the main train station, a highway, international, local and regional bus terminals, and congested public transportation. The Sava Amphitheatre became stuck in limbo, making it a perfect canvas for projecting grand projects whose only purpose was to gain easy political points.

The social, economic and political changes that occurred with the fall of Yugoslavia have resulted in pervasive privatization of socially and state owned property. Already by 1985, when urban planning laws were changed, the role of urban planners was reduced to being facilitators of investor's wishes. During the 1990s the potential of the Sava Amphitheatre as a site for grand political projects came to full prominence, the boldest of which was known as 'Europolis'. The 'Europolis' idea was introduced in 1996 by Mirjana Marković, leader of the JUL

(Yugoslavian United Left) political party and wife of the Serbian autocrat Slobodan Milošević. In addition to 'Europolis', Marković introduced the idea of creating a Chinese Quarter in Belgrade. Both ideas were part of a campaign for local elections held in the autumn of 1996, and both turned out to be failures; though Belgrade does now have a huge Chinese shopping centre in the same part of the city as Marković wanted to build the China Quarter.

With the 1990s eaten by the wars, it was only after 2000 that the full extent of the impact of privatization and transformation of the political system became visible in the city and the great economic potential of its riverbanks came into focus. Unfortunately, as in previous decades, the political elites did not consider the riverbanks as common goods or sources for the further development of the city. Instead, the city's riverbanks remain an eternal source of corruption, personal places for personal gain and shady agreements between politicians and foreign investors with suspicious portfolios.

## "Celebrating Belgrade"

After many attempts to drive urban renewal through a variety of mega projects, combining shiny pictures, extravagant names, lofty promises of benefits to the public, striking media attention, changes to urban

legislation and no realization in the years that followed, the newest manifestation of this formula is the “Belgrade Waterfront” project. While other projects, although actively supported by the city government, at least kept up the illusion of being initiated by private investors following the market logic, in this case the Serbian Government appears as the main instigator of the Belgrade Waterfront development, luring potential investors with the promise of guarantees for any losses if the performance of the project on the markets guarantees for any losses if the project does not succeed. The project hit the fast lane with the appearance of an investor, the enigmatic Eagle Hills Company, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The legitimacy of this company was never questioned, even though leaders of the Company were involved in projects that have led to state debt (Abuja, Nigeria), constant postponement of construction (Erbil Downtown, Kurdistan), realization of only a small part of the project (Crescent Bay, Karachi, Pakistan), and selling (with awareness of the local government) land that the company does not own (Mohali, India).

Also, in the last couple of years, from 2011, the area of the Sava riverside known as Savamala became a testing field for a series of experimental ‘revival’, ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘cultural transformation’ projects. The process started by taking over, reusing and re-purposing derelict buildings, often in dubious privatizations, in order to create a new cultural and tourist district in Belgrade. The most noticeable change arising from this development is the high concentration of bars and clubs that have found refuge in unoccupied areas of Savamala as legislation on noise and working hours have become stricter in other parts of the city.

## Waterfront

The first public presentation of the Belgrade Waterfront project came with the campaign for municipal elections in Belgrade in 2012. The project reappeared during the 2014 parliamentary election campaign as the trump card of the current Prime Minister and ruling party, promoting a “better future”. Images were presented to convince the electorate that the €3 billion investment (which has since grown to €5 billion) was already in the bag. Planning a better future by constructing luxurious apartments, when hundreds of thousands of people are without durable housing solutions; construction of the larg-



Beograd →, photo: Damjan Rehm Bogunović

est shopping mall on the Balkans, when each day the number of people living below the poverty line is increasing; construction of new retail and office spaces, while fading ‘for rent signs’, which have hung on the same buildings for years, are everyday sight; all of this seems at least questionable. Adding luxurious hotels that should transform Belgrade overnight into the tourist destination like Dubai, the relocation of the main train and bus stations from the centre of the city, and the creation of marina for private yachts, the plan starts to resemble a bad joke. The project was presented as a solution to unemployment and jump-starter for the economy, offering precarious temporary jobs in construction and low paid jobs in the service sector. Since the project was given the status of “national priority and importance” the state has invested large amounts of public money and changed regulations to speed up the project. While Serbia’s government sees the Waterfront as a major contribution to the city’s economic future, critics have claimed that the deal with Eagle Hills, a company based in the United Arab Emirates, was unconstitutional, because it has involved suspending Serbian laws in the Waterfront area.

In order to create the conditions to realize this megalomaniac project at short notice, planning rules have been deregulated at breakneck speed and gargantuan cost (to the public budget), passed against the law following an undemocratic procedure that only simulated citizen’s participation. The processes leading to the Belgrade Waterfront project were non-transparent, the designated roles and potential risks for the public actors involved are unclear, and legislative mechanisms have been bent and bypassed,

setting a (bent) direction for planning and the development of the city in the future.

The project includes plans for the construction of 6,178 housing units of an average size of 135 m<sup>2</sup>. Anticipated revenue from the sale of these apartments is approximately €2.5 billion, which indicates that the average price of an apartment will be just over €400,000. In a country where the real average monthly wage is around €300, it would take a little over 111 years from someone on an average salary to buy one of these apartments (assuming they don't buy anything else in the meantime).

### The resistance

Despite the fact that since 2012 the ruling party has won every election at every level with enormous success, there is nonetheless a critical mass of Belgrade citizens who are aware of the dangers that projects like this could mean for the city, and who are ready to be watch dogs of the public interest. As a reaction to these processes the initiative *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd / Don't let Belgrade D(r)own* was formed, with the goal of stopping further degradation and plunder of the city in the name of colossal urban and architectural projects. The initiative brings together organizations and individuals interested in urban and cultural policy, sustainable city development, fair use of common resources, and the involvement of citizens in the urban development of their environment.

The first public actions that the group organized attempted to use existing democratic participatory tools; however, this proved to be only a simulation of participation, without any real effective power. Changes to the General Urban Plan of Belgrade have brought about a new legal framework, enabling the occupation and privatization of public space owned by the city, removing obligatory architectural competitions as a format for expert and public involvement, fragmenting planning, and allowing social aspects of life in the city to be ignored. Around one hundred citizens, activists and experts grouped together to submit complaints regarding the changes made to the General Urban Plan of Belgrade, and as a result citizens filed over 2000 complaints. During the public consultation, the Planning Commission rejected most of these complaints, accepting only a few symbolically, in a vain attempt to keep up the appear-

ance of following democratic procedures. In the next step toward creating the new legal framework, the investor's development model was written into the Spatial Plan for the "most valuable" part of Belgrade – contrary to the regulations of the Republic of Serbia. During the public session on changes to the Spatial Plan, *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd / Don't let Belgrade D(r)own* organized a performance dubbed Operation Lifebelt (*Operacija šlauf*), in which protestors passed around beach paraphernalia (beach balls, swimming rings and the like), sang a song celebrating Belgrade and made noise. A large yellow duck, which later became the symbol of opposition to the Belgrade Waterfront project, was first deployed at the commencement of the parliamentary debate on the "special law" - *Lex specialis*, when it was placed in front of National parliament to draw public attention to the scam behind the special law.

The *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd / Don't let Belgrade D(r)own* initiative continued to strongly oppose the Belgrade Waterfront project in public by highlighting the irregularities in its implementation and using every opportunity to educate the public about the harmfulness of the project, including organising numerous panel discussions and publishing two editions of the initiative's gazette, with each edition printed in 10.000 copies.

The first protest that the initiative organized was on the occasion of the signing of the contract for the Belgrade Waterfront project, in April 2015, when protestors were blocked by two trams and lines of police, so they could not be seen by the guests and politicians attending the signing ceremony. In the following year, the initiative continued to research, inform and respond to all the different aspects of the implementation of the project. Several public events, debates, protests, collective admonition submissions were organized, and the group's members were active every time there was an event related to the misuse of the regulations and power in order to legalize and build the project.

### The total eclipse of democracy

One of the landmark moments occurred on election night of the 24th-25th April 2016, when a group of about thirty masked men, with the support of heavy equipment, clandestinely demolished a row of buildings next to the Geozavod building in Savamala.

The masked men detained workers, tied up the night guards, confiscated their mobile phones and prevented passers-by from going through the area. Throughout these events, the police *did not respond* to numerous calls from citizens, which the Ombudsman later stated in an official report was an organized campaign instigated from top of the City authorities.

In response to this event, the initiative organized a series of street demonstrations, gathering more than 20,000 citizens on each occasion to walk through centre of Belgrade to demand accountability for the inaction of the police officials, the resignation of the City leadership, and for the freedom of the and for the freedom of the media to properly report on the situation.

This resulted in a counter campaign orchestrated from the top of the state and city governments. The counter campaign was persecuted through slander in the tabloid newspapers and by politicians, who claimed that members of the initiative are foreign mercenaries working for the interests of tycoons, mafia, etc., and by applying legal pressure through instigating a large number of misdemeanour charges, which members of the initiative are now swamped by.

The real truth is that at the beginning, the actions of the initiative were funded either through donations from members or organizations. The initiative also collected donations through various events – selling T-shirts and a public fundraising campaign to which citizens gave more than €10,000. All donations and transactions have been properly recorded and are fully transparent. This information is published on the initiative's blog, which was setup to demonstrate how funds collected through civil society crowdfunding campaigns is used, and to respond to the many accusations made against the initiative that it is a weapon in the hands of foreign forces and tycoons.

In early autumn 2016 the street protests came to an end with a large concert in Belgrade's main public square, symbolically marking the date of the liberation of Belgrade during the Second World War, on the 20th of October. In response, the government tried to thwart further efforts against the Belgrade Waterfront project by instigating a series of more than 20 legal processes and orchestrating a media campaign and online attacks by pro-regime media against the organisers. The initiative continued during the winter through roundtables and workshops about urban-

istic activism. But, things changed in February 2017, when the ex-wife of the Belgrade Mayor Siniša Mali decided to act as a whistle blower. She approached the investigative journalism network KRIK and told them that her ex-husband had admitted that he organized the overnight demolition of the row of buildings next to Geozavod in Savamala. Within 48 hours the initiative organized another mass protest, held on February 15 2017. Again, more than 10,000 people turned out onto the streets to demand the urgent dismissal of the Mayor and an immediate investigation into his role in demolition of Savamala.

### The agreement

After almost two years of silence, on September the 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, the Serbian Government published its agreement with the UAE investor on the Government website. Strangely, all 259 pages of full agreement were published in English, while only the pre-agreement, some 69 pages, was published in Serbian.

According to the agreement, the Serbian Government owns only 32% of the "Belgrade Waterfront" company, while the strategic investor, "Belgrade Waterfront Capital Investment", owns 68% of the company. Based on this ratio, the profit will be shared. The UAE investor has obliged itself to provide three hundred million euros toward financing the project. The catch is that the UAE company will invest only half of that sum. The other half is being provided through a loan to the Serbian Government by the same company.

According to the contract, the UAE partner will provide a forty million euro loan to the Serbian Government, for the costs of cleaning and expropriation of the land; and a further loan of ninety million euros for the cost of building infrastructure. The bulk of the Serbian Government's investment is the form of land – 90 hectares (approximately 243 acres). The agreement states that, according to the business plan of Belgrade Waterfront, the company may use this land (the riverside of the River Sava, near the City centre) for 99 years for no fee.

The Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, has announced that Siniša Mali will only suffer political consequences for his actions (rather than legal) and that he will not be the mayor for a second term. This only gives more reasons for protesters to go on. The activities of the *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* / Don't let Belgrade D(r)own initiative have shown that within the sleepy and depressed civil society of Belgrade and Serbia, potential for different and new kinds of politics still exist. The initiative continues its activities through protests, actions and raising awareness that each citizen has a right to the city. That is the right they fight for. Although there is a long and uncertain fight in front of them, they will not give up as long as they keep in mind their own motto: "Our city!" ■■■

# Skopje 2014: Illusion of Development

By Ivana Dragšić

Megalomania, as discussed in sociology, history, political science, cultural studies or even social psychology, thrives on two parameters: excess of power/performance and delusion. Notable historical examples of mainly male political or military personas usually accompany this discourse and we are regularly reminded of a plethora of characters such as Caligula, Nero, Stalin or Turkmenbashi. Skopje 2014, the Macedonian Government's project for the reconstruction of the capital fulfils both of the criteria listed above: excess of power and delusion.

Skopje 2014 is the most expensive construction project in Macedonian history. The scale of the intervention in public space can be compared to the urban renewal that followed the earthquake in 1963, as well as to the earthquake itself. The project, up to the end of 2016, has cost about eight hundred million euros according to publicly available documents. Even in the dusk of 22 deaths, 4 missing people and the evacuation of over 1000 due to decayed infrastructure and the heavy rains of August 2016, the Government of the right wing VMRO-DPMNE continued installing new monuments and urban equipment (benches, candelabra, etc.), refaçading buildings and spending public funds to keep up the illusion of construction, development, and change. Just a few months after the deadly floods of November 2016, the City of Skopje planned a thirty million euro for baroque faux and approximately EUR 300.000 for tackling pollution in the 2017 budget. To make developments like this possible, Skopje 2014 is being funded by the budgets of an additional 32 public/national institutions.

Currently, the Skopje 2014 project consists of nearly forty buildings, over one hundred sculptures and monuments, two bridges, a church, three squares, and countless urban interventions such as fountains, candelabra, fast-food stands, and so on.

The former Prime Minister of Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, was closest to claiming authorship of the Skopje 2014 project and is held responsible by the critical public as the ideological creator and motor of the idea. We could hear him in the published wiretapped communications dubbed "The Bombs"<sup>1</sup>, in which he frivolously ordered Ministers to execute his ideas, such as the construction of a small protective wall around the banks of Lake Ohrid, or to assist him to choose the nicest parcel of land on the top of the hill that used to serve as Skopje's lungs, and even the demolition of a recently constructed project with explosives, which a political opponent had invested in.

Every monument featured in the Skopje 2014 project is a monument to Nikola Gruevski and his name is inscribed in all its mistaken and fake inscriptions, messages and dedications.

## Excess of power

The first civic reaction to the announcement of plans to reconstruct the city was a gathering of around 150 people, mostly students and activists, highlighting the importance of physical space for public space. A notable representative of VMRO-DPMNE called for a counter protest. The next day

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Nikola Gruevski, photo: gov.mk

four thousand to four and a half thousand counter-protesters (according to police reports) showed up, while the Ministry of Interior, controlled by VMRO-DPMNE, sent only 36 regular police officers, who, understandably, failed to protect the announced, peaceful citizens' protest for the protection of public space. Protesters were attacked, spat at, called names and slandered, and finally, removed from Macedonia square where the protesters gathered. This was the first demonstration of physical force as a means of protecting the Skopje 2014 project and its full implementation, in March 2009. In the late summer of 2013, the same political establishment sent four hundred to four hundred and fifty full-equipped special policemen to apprehend eleven "park-defenders" camping in a small park in the centre of Skopje, who were blocking the construction of a new building. This was neither the second, nor the last, demonstration of violent endorsement of the Skopje 2014 project by public or national institutions or by the regime in general.

However, there is more to the excesses of power and regulation of public space, knowledge, and cultural heritage in this project than only the literal manifestation of physical power. Namely, public space and the public sphere were first redefined and the definition broadened. Later, public spaces were additionally regulated by mass surveillance equipment; private security companies were employed to protect the monuments; and social/meeting

points and visual and auditory content have been destroyed to prevent any kind of public articulation or performance.

Most opponents of the project were stigmatized and slandered in the media; some lost their jobs, social services or homes; others pragmatically self-censored or withdrew from the struggle. Cultural heritage was demolished and damaged, public greenery and other smaller green spaces were destroyed and collective memory was erased. The demonstration of power, as well as the preparedness and productivity, communicated that Skopje 2014 must be implemented, by any means necessary.

## Delusion

The story that Skopje 2014 tells has nothing or little to do with the *Macedonian struggle* or national identity through history. It commemorates many people who killed or betrayed political opponents or collaborated with fascists, but have specific sounding names, life stories and mythologies. This chronology satanizes the communist party and diminishes the importance of the people's liberation, the partisan struggle, AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia) and ASNOM (Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia) to that point, that it is unclear that they are landmark events in the official establishment of Macedonian national identity, institutions, language codification, even the establishment of the

Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric. It victimizes the “Macedonians” in all historical eras and presents them as moral winners, idealizing “Macedonianness” and “Macedonianity”. The project tells the story of a small heroic and very conscientious people, constantly oppressed by great powers and larger geo-political interests. It preaches a direct relationship between the Macedonian people and the Bible, Alexander the Great, literacy and other great concepts.

In reality, the Municipality of Centar, where the Skopje 2014 project is being constructed, was the only municipality where voters overthrew the rule of VMRO-DPMNE in three electoral rounds of heavily rigged elections. Independent media were flooded with testimonies and documentaries by citizens who do not identify with the project and are avoiding the city centre. Then the colourful revolution happened and the people finally held their long denied referendum on the Skopje 2014 project.

In order to keep the illusion of a strong historical background, but also development and growth, all levels of the state, occupied by VMRO-DPMNE, worked at full steam to perpetuate the delusion of the Skopje 2014 project. A series of documentaries about Skopje 2014 were produced while it is still in construction, alongside elementary school excursions and newly established rituals and behaviours around holidays. The project was hyped up by all media: street names, urban equipment (baroque fast-food stands), miniatures and memorabilia, carriage rides and masked antique warriors posing for photos. Essentially, a full-on amusement park.

### From megalomania to poverty

Firstly, the cost of the project does not justify one of the main advertised benefits – that it will save money being spent on rent by public and national institutions that do not possess real estate. In addition, the quality of the materials used in some places is so low that buildings and other objects have decayed or have been broken and have had to be repaired already. The buildings, despite being constructed in the last 5 years, are far from energy saving, let alone sustainable.

Secondly, the new façades are not nearly enough for what the “repaired” buildings need, causing additional damage or main-

tenance costs to the residents, who are already dealing with flooded basements and broken elevators.

Third, the project has drained Macedonia’s budget year after year and will continue to do so, until VMRO-DPMNE are removed from all levels of institutional power. It indirectly affects all other social and economic fields the state could have supported – environment, education, agriculture and public health – all of which are in deteriorating condition. Clearly, the priorities of this political cadre are not complementary to the needs of Macedonian society, as demonstrated above in the example of the budget of the City of Skopje, and as such, they must be replaced as soon as possible.

Finally, 2017 is the period when the state must pay back loan rates, and the Macedonian government was still borrowing two weeks prior to the elections in December 2016; it did this despite economic analysis predicting a collapse of the retirement system, for example. The Macedonian state is rushing into poverty while performing terribly on pollution, infant mortality rates, secondary infections in public health institutions, restriction of workers’ rights and immigration.

Macedonia, one of the poorest states in Europe, has become a case study of megalomania-induced poverty and pollution, driven by one of the richest political parties in Europe. Behind it lies the neo-liberal capitalist logic, the logic of acquisition and enclosure, piling up surplus and providing comfortable lives for those in power, perpetuating the cycle by re-investing in the maintenance of the party in power and furthering the impoverishment of all others. It will cost the people, society and nature of Macedonia a lot in the years to come. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> “The Bombs” are wiretapped materials of over 20.000 Macedonian citizens, leaked from Macedonian intelligence services through the opposition party SDSM. The wiretapped materials reveal accusations of vote fixing, police cover-up of a murder, corruption on municipal and even judicial levels, physical threats to journalists and political opponents, as well as orders of physical violence and counter protests. Some English translations can be found here <http://interactive.aljazeera.com/ajb/2015/makedonija-bombe/eng/index.html>



# Urban Commons: De-Commodifying Urban Life

By Ana Džokić and Marc Neelen

It is the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, a chilly but sunny day in Rotterdam. This morning the telephone keeps ringing. And within hours, the first journalist arrives, glancing around somewhat puzzled at the activity around the rundown buildings. We are at City in the Making (*Stad in de Maak*), an initiative aiming to bring defunct buildings into a collective “pool”, to provide for affordable living and working.

The previous evening, City in the Making was awarded a prestigious award for its activities. And with that, our previously low-key work suddenly had hit the limelight. The award is given for a “ground breaking temporary use of empty real estate”. We explain to the journalist how it all started around a set of twin buildings that, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, had become “toxic assets” for their owner – a housing corporation, operating 45,000 social rental apartments in the city. Too bad to use and too expensive to fix, this set of centrally located buildings suddenly lost their economic relevance for the owner and risked being boarded-up for the next decade. Crucially, at the same time, there was a pressing need for cheap living and working space in the city, which would require such buildings to remain open and available.

This contradiction triggered a small group of people to start City in the Making. In 2013, after intense negotiations, we reached an agreement with the owner, who transferred the right of use for a period of 10 years, free of charge. And what started as a mere test to see if these neglected buildings could be opened again, has slowly but steadily grown to a “pool” of seven buildings, which provide apartments and workspace for 35 people. While taking the journalist through the ground-

floor workshops, we explain that providing cheap space in buildings that are at our temporary disposal has become less of a challenge. Instead, the key is to let these buildings become the sites of self-reliant and self-governing communities, by taking property out of the real-estate market and transferring them to collective ownership and governance. In essence: turning them into urban commons.

## Stepping out of the market

The very same day of the interview with the journalist, a group of citizens of a nearby co-housing group contacted us for help. Their initiative, which has been a success for over twenty years, is being threatened with termination now the municipality has decided to sell the buildings in which they are located. The letter of the City of Rotterdam could not have been clearer: they prefer require the residents removed from the premises, for good; so that the buildings can be sold to the highest bidder. On a larger scale, the city has even more ambitious plans in socially engineering the population. Its “Housing Vision 2030” sets out plans to demolish 20,000 cheaper or affordable publicly owned apartments and to replace them with more expensive ones. This effectively denies a substantial segment of the city’s population access to affordable housing. Or, as some more outspoken critics have labelled it: deporting unwanted populations from the city itself. These circumstances point to the urgency of establishing other forms of organising among inhabitants, which can safeguard their existence in the city.

A small, but relevant set of examples can help in this. In Germany, the *Mietshäuser*

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*Syndikat* is a pool of collectively owned and governed apartment buildings. The over-one-hundred buildings in this pool have been taken out of the market, to set them free from speculative real-estate pressures. In the terms of the urban economy, these buildings have been stripped of their commodity value. This makes them available and affordable not only to the first generation using them, but also to each following generation. Moreover, the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* generates a revolving investment fund, with which it takes further buildings out of the market: a snowball that is rapidly building-up speed. The cleverness of the model has spurred a number of international spin-offs, like *Vri-jcoop* in the Netherlands.

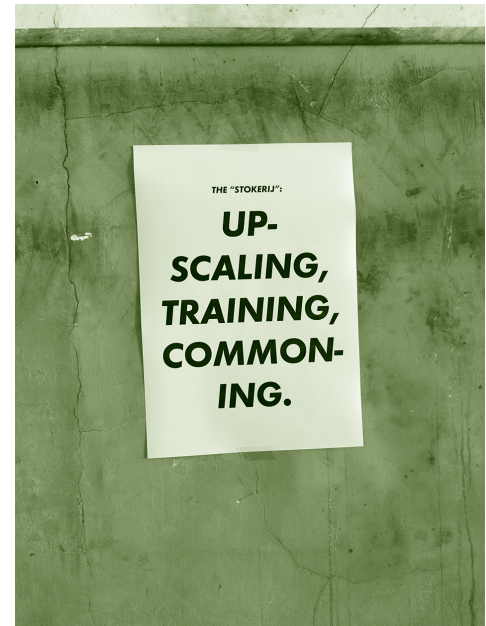
However, collectivising and commoning vital aspects of our lives does not stop with the physical spaces that provide for our livelihood. It also encompasses the economic domains in which we act, domains that can to some degree provide independence from the mainstream economy. Over recent years several “commoned” economic spheres have emerged, from co-operative banks, like Cooperative for Ethical Finance (ZEF) and its subsidiary *eBanka* in Croatia, to more radical models such as *Sardex* – the Sardinian business-to-business interest free crediting system and complementary currency.

### Commoning the housing issue

On the early morning of December 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 it is still pitch-dark when the first buses leave the garage of Belgrade Public Transport company. One by one they go out on route, but some carry rather unusual advertising boards with the messages of the campaign “Welcome to Housing Hell”, launched by the Who Builds the City (*Ko gradi grad*) platform. The messages stand out bright, even if their content projects the far-from-bright housing reality of Belgrade and Serbia: irredeemable mortgages, unprotected renters, energy poverty, forced evictions, non-existent social housing. According to statistics, housing expenses heavily burden 70% of people in Serbia. Who Builds the City campaigns to bring the wide felt discontent around the housing conditions in Serbia into the open.

With 97% of housing in Serbia being privately owned, “regulated” through the market, and without any viable alternative for those who cannot sustainably access

that market, this situation “screams” for ways out. For this reason, over recent years, we have been working with Who Builds the City on a model of housing that aims to collectively create affordable living and working space that is accessible to a large segment of Belgrade’s population. In order to avoid the personal vulnerability of individual citizens, this “Smarter Building” initiative sets out to establish a model of housing as a commoned resource. Much like the line of reasoning emerging in Rotterdam, or as practised by the *Mietshäuser Syndikat*, these spaces would be created outside of the market, thus stripping them from their commodity value and rendering them “inert” from the perspective of the speculative real-estate economy.



City in the making, photo: [stealth.ultd.net](http://stealth.ultd.net)

The work on this model has progressed substantially over recent years, but is haunted by two key obstacles: firstly, the difficulty of repositioning housing from a domain in which unresolved housing conditions are perceived as the personal “failure” of the people affected, toward a broad understanding that this is an unacceptable reality, and, secondly, the difficulty of mounting common actions in today’s society. While the first may be addressed in campaigns, work on the legal framework around housing (i.e. by intervening in the proposed Law on Housing, which was adopted in Parliament in Serbia at the end of 2016) and advocacy work with housing communities, the latter – establishing common action as a viable possibility in today’s society – requires not only per-

sistent groundwork, but also demonstrable examples set in real life.

The prospects for needed commoned resources or initiatives in the city do not stop with housing, but expand to work (cooperative production, for instance), finance and parts of public (or former public) services that have, in the meanwhile, lost their public focus, like energy production.

### Up-scaling, training, commoning

For an increasing number of people life in the city is a struggle. In the context of the city as a site of speculative economies, of cities as investment vehicles, we experience that our place is not guaranteed, but must be claimed, fought for. In the wider European context, large segments of the population have felt this through disruptive changes, like eviction and foreclosures of houses, and the urban poverty from Madrid to Athens or Belgrade. If we want to sustain our ground in the cities, it is urgent to find spaces from which to act, as well as tools and practices to subvert and shift this reality.

So, let's go back to *City in the Making* in Rotterdam for a moment. Could the buildings (gained on a temporary bases) become such spaces? What if there were not seven but many more buildings pooled into a collective resource? What if there were 400? And how could access be gained on a permanent basis? Does it mean that buildings would have to be bought, in order to get them out of the market? How to deal with this paradox, but also how to gain capital for that step? What if pressure mounts up and the inhabitants of the 20,000 affordable apartments that are supposed to be demolished in Rotterdam would join as well? How do institutions look at this prospect? What about the legal framework? Finally, what experience is there to form new practices of governance of such commons, if this opportunity would open up?

These questions have become our driving force, enabling us to see that the buildings available right now can provide a temporary "training ground", from which more resistant, robust urban communities can grow. That "ground" would allow experimentation with forms of governance in

and between communities, to understand how "design rules", as they have been postulated by, for instance, Elinor Ostrom (a pioneering researcher of the commons), can be adapted to permanent contemporary urban communities.

Although many of the people involved so far intuitively understand the basic principle of such a step, in practice we are far from having the appropriate skills and mind-set to make the jump from an individualised life and working career to setting up structures and "institutions" that mitigate our individual vulnerability towards a joint resilience. Participating in an urban garden, or visiting a "commons café" seems less intrusive to our lives than collectively resolving the more essential parts of our lives. In many ways, this is the context and challenge of understanding, setting up and bringing to life contemporary urban commons. For many it is still a stretch to answer these essential parts of our lives through practices of commoning in their own situation.

In this light, it is no surprise that the full-page article on *City in the Making* in the mainstream AD newspaper, written by the journalist that visited us on that chilly morning in Rotterdam, featured much of the adventure of living and working under makeshift conditions in the buildings, but close to nothing on bringing these buildings, as commoned resources, into collective governance. That, it appears, is still a stretch too far to serve its readers.

Commoning livelihood provisions, from housing to energy, has great potential, but equally brings us back to the challenges faced by the early co-operatives (some one hundred and fifty years ago): it requires a substantial contribution from people (in time or financial resources). And more urgently, it brings such provisions into the reach of quite specific groups of citizens, rather than making them universally available to the benefit of all. Therefore, commoning can be seen as a partial solution, or in other cases as a condition to (temporarily) make our lives more resilient, or train ourselves for a *modus* of society yet to come. It is a possibility to take us beyond where we have gotten stuck, failed, or been left to struggle with only our own resources today. ■■■

# Parks or Perks: Can there be a Private Agora

by Aleksandra Savanović

As modern forms of ancient *agoras*, parks and squares of contemporary cities serve as centres of public life, points where various groups, political viewpoints and interests are displayed and contested. However, recent developments and attempts to “revitalize” and “re-arrange” these spaces signal an untimely death of *agora* as we know it, or rather its well-planned murder. We all know how the neoliberal dream looks: roads, electricity and water supply, heating systems, telecommunication networks, waste-management, even cultural institutions – from museums to theatres and libraries – have all been put to auction or were already privatized throughout the world. For these once public services, private ownership and management allegedly means greater efficiency and better quality, where ‘efficiency’ translates into profitability and ‘better quality’ corresponds with the necessity to innovate in the competitive market, resulting in satisfied customers, of course only those who can afford it.

Parks and squares, at least until recently, seemed to have been left out of this equation, if nothing else than because there had been no financial incentive to include them, no golden profitability on the horizon, or put simply, they could not be sufficiently exploited. But it seems this might change as well. In London, one of the centres of the contemporary neoliberal frenzy, this development has gone the farthest: the list of privately owned public spaces – squares, waterfronts, and parks – is a remarkable one. In 2011 the Occupy movement in London tried to occupy Paternoster Square, where the London Stock Exchange is located. They were thwarted by the police, who sealed off the entrance and stopped the protesters

from getting in. Although repeatedly referred to as a “public space” at time of its development, the square, owned by Mitsubishi Estate Co., is designated as private property to which the public is granted access but is not, however, considered a public right of way<sup>1</sup>, which allows the owner to limit access to it at any time.

## Victims of gentrification

A little closer to home, on the south-eastern periphery of the European Union – from Turkey and Greece to the Western Balkans, attempts to make parks, squares and river banks productive and profitable spaces have usually meant their transformation into private real-estate development projects. Whether they are shopping malls, parking spaces, luxury residential areas, office spaces, bars and cafes, or limited-access open areas, the plan is always the same. From Cvjetni trg in Zagreb, Istanbul’s Gezi park and Taksim square to the disconnected and almost instinctive struggles in Belgrade such as the preservation of the Plane trees on one of the city’s central boulevards, the Peti Parkić development project in Belgrade municipality of Zvezdara, the refurbishment of Studentski park and the infamous Belgrade Waterfront project – the region itself has seen a good deal of attempts to transform these spaces for all into beautiful and efficient resorts for a few.

In some instances, as in the cases of Cvjetni trg, Gezi park, Peti Parkić and the Belgrade Waterfront project, public spaces were directly targeted and their transformation into private estates is now under way or has already been completed<sup>2</sup>; in

other cases – such as the Plane trees and Studentski park – the decision to “reconstruct” these sites was linked to wider processes of urban renewal, or rather gentrification, combined with efforts by city officials to “save money”, practice efficiency and make the city more investment-friendly. Obviously, all these cases of private enclosures and renewal schemes bare a clear connection to neoliberal city agendas. Their main features – the imperative of growth and growth-oriented policy programmes, entrepreneurial forms of government, privatization and spatial polarization – shape and guide them to a significant degree. Complemented, inspired and pushed by the expansion of private capital into previously public owned city infrastructure, these attempts imply and show-case a disturbing trend in curtailing and narrowing of physical spaces for political and civic action.

Even more troublesome is the fact that we are witnessing attempts to abolish the *public function* of public spaces. Neoliberal urbanism – as public policy on one hand, and private, for-profit endeavour on the other – implies a thorough restructuring that transform *agoras*, literally “gathering places” or “assemblies” such as parks and squares, from spaces of political action and sites of civic engagement, into highly regulated and restricted places where access is allowed only under the condition of full compliance to their intended purpose, and only in so far as they serve the purpose of practicing regulated leisure and enabling endless consumption.

This, of course, is nothing new. As David Harvey had shown in his work, the debt-financed suburbanization and construction of mega highways in the post-World War Two United States, which totally re-engineered whole cities and their metropolitan regions, was not only a matter of creating new infrastructure: it also entailed a radical transformation of lifestyles and alteration of the political landscape “as subsidized homeownership for the middle classes changed the focus of community action towards the defence of property values and individualized identities” (*Right to the City*, 2008). This would prove to be at the root of the spatial polarization and urban displacement strategies of the late 1970s, which curtailed civic action and its disobedience tactics, such as protests to blockades. Civic action was diluted, on the one hand, through a radical re-composi-

tion of urban environments – parts of which were turned into high-class business, shopping, and residential areas via ambitious redevelopment and urban renewal projects, while other parts came to experience gradual impoverishment and criminalization – and, on the other, by the development of, what Rose & Miller, building on Foucault’s concept of governmentality, call governmental technologies “for governing at a distance” (*Political Power Beyond the State*, 2010), which seek to create entities capable of both bearing and practicing a kind of *regulated freedom*.

### Removal of “ugliness”

Fast forward to the immediate experience of our contemporary urban surrounding in the cities of Istanbul, Zagreb and Belgrade, as well as many others in the region, which reveal a similar trajectory, only in somewhat changed circumstances and through far less subtle mechanisms. Central urban areas are gradually being gentrified. While these sites are being prepared for their new residents and users, they are gradually being cleared of all their unsightly occupants, such as refugees, the homeless, poor people and Roma communities, as well as informal economies of all types. Upon their reconstruction both the boulevard, where 400 Plane trees were cut down over the course of several weeks, and the refurbished Studentski park, were given their appropriate epilogues. The boulevard, formerly a centre of informal trade, was turned into a zoned parking area with far less space for informal commerce but far more monitoring and policing by communal police. Studentski park, located in the city centre, became the first ever park in Belgrade to be locked overnight, and the first ever free and open-access public space in the city to which entry has become restricted<sup>3</sup>. The explanation was a familiar one – to limit inappropriate behaviour, noise, vandalism, alcohol and drug consumption – as well as the plan for its further development – to build a three-floor underground parking garage.

From this followed other “interventions”. After the refugee crisis exploded in the summer of 2015, another park in Belgrade, this time in the proximity of the main bus and train stations, became a focal point where refugees came to get information, receive humanitarian aid, rest or simply spend time with each other and people

who offered them company and support. However, as the park is adjoining the area where the Belgrade Waterfront development project was just being launched, it soon became a matter of concern for the proper “enforcement of communal order”. Toward the end of summer, it was entirely ploughed and encircled with plastic fencing. The same scenario repeated in late spring of 2016. The park was pre-emptively ploughed and fenced in, while humanitarian provisions and emergency shelters were dislocated and the police presence drastically increased.

### Cities for people, not for capital

The targets in all three examples of the “urban revitalization” of Belgrade seem to be the same: they are places of unbound leisure freed from consumption; centrally located urban areas (parks, sidewalks and squares); points of direct social interaction and exchange; devoid of specified function; transformative *living* places. They represent the last remaining oases in our urban environments where any kind of unregulated (and unreported), spontaneous mass gatherings can actually take place. They are modern *agoras*, physical spaces that enable and encourage, not foreclose, civic and political action.

Any kind of progressive policy that envisions cities for people and not for capital must encourage the production and spread of these types of spaces – and not privatize or limit access to them. Places where communities can be created

through the practice of commoning, places that inspire and encourage citizens’ engagement, in short *public* spaces, are central to any kind of politics that understands itself as truly democratic. This kind of politics should encourage social practice of collective management and/or production of resources for non-profit purposes, as well as political action that demands production and preservation of the commons, and works to prevent their commodification, privatization and corporatization for the benefit of elites. Initiatives in Belgrade such as *Baštalište*, which promotes and encourages urban gardening, Supernatural, which advocates for an alternative development plan for Ada Huja (a waste disposal area on the bank of the Danube), as well as *Ne davimo Beograd*, an initiative that brings people together against the privatization of the Sava riverfront intended by the Belgrade Waterfront project, represent such attempts. Ironically, the guidelines for this policy are outlined in an infamous retail chain’s campaign slogan: “One who lives in Belgrade, creates it”. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Right of way is a right enjoyed by one person (either for him/herself or as a member of the public) to pass over another’s land subject to such restrictions and conditions as are specified in the grant or sanctioned by custom, by virtue of which the right exist.

<sup>2</sup> Except in the case of Peti Parkić, where the citizens have been successful in stopping the intended development project.

<sup>3</sup> According to the statement given by city manager Goran Vesić in July 2015, the park is to be locked after midnight, when the “visiting” hours end, and who ever visits the park after hours will be charged accordingly. In the words of Vesić, the decision to lock the park was made to enable the smoother “enforcement of communal order”.

# Energy Management: A Tragedy of a Success in Serbia

by Jovana Gligorijević

Vrbas is a town and municipality located in the South Bačka District of the autonomous province of Vojvodina, northern Serbia. Its name stems from the Serbian word for “willow” – vrba. Speaking about willows, there’s a species of this tree named “weeping willow” or “sad willow”. This is interesting on a symbolic level, because our story from Vrbas is nothing but sad. It is a story about two young and enthusiastic engineers, who did their best to create an energy management model for Vrbas. Their model saved a lot of energy and money for the municipality. Unfortunately, it turned out that while they tried to save the town energy, they wasted their own.

Željko Zečević and Nikola Vujović were employees of the Construction Directorate, a part of the local administration of Vrbas Municipality. Every day at work they faced the same problems: public buildings and street lights with enormous energy consumption and dissipation, along with poor maintenance and care. So, almost seven years ago they came up with the idea to develop a model of efficient and responsible use of energy, to bring order to the energy system in Vrbas. Zečević and Vujović decided to start on their own, alongside their primary work at the Construction Directorate. For this issue of “Perspectives” they explain that most of this work was done incognito: “Our job in the Directorate demanded that we go and check out public buildings. We used that opportunity to ‘spy’ on the situation regarding energy consumption.”

They checked every public building, every room, every plug and socket, every window, even every light bulb in public buildings and on the streets of Vrbas. They measured, listed and collected all the necessary data. And they used their own resources to do it. When asked how long it took them to do this, they are not sure – approximately two to three years, they say. Sometime in 2010, they were almost done. Luckily for them, just around that time the Municipality of Vrbas created a Development Strat-

egy, which included energy management. Soon, an Energy Department was established at the Construction Directorate – the public company where they worked. The two engineers approached the mayor and local government and presented their energy management model. Soon it was incorporated into the Development Strategy and they both became employees of the Energy Department.

For some time, things went quite smoothly: Zečević and Vujović had the full support of local authorities, so they began to apply their model, first in the building of municipality. They also got all the necessary equipment they needed: thermographic cameras, a blower door (a machine used to measure the air-tightness of buildings), temperature data loggers (a portable measurement instrument, capable of autonomously recording temperatures over a defined period of time), gas emission data loggers, and also, special data loggers that measure the efficiency of the boilers used to warm public buildings. Vujovic says that soon after that, they took part in the “Exchange 3” programme, established by the European Union, in order to introduce EU models of work and improvement of capacities and efficiency of local self-governments in Serbia. They applied together with the municipalities of Kula and Bačka Palanka, and their project

was accepted. “Exchange 3” granted them with the opportunity to systematically check energy situation in all public buildings in the municipality, this time publicly and properly. Thanks to “Exchange 3” they partially succeeded in establishing a register of all street light items in Vrbas. Also, the Municipality of Vrbas organized training for key stakeholders in the energy management system.

After they finished the assessment of all the public structures in the municipality and had identified their problems, like inefficient windows, roofs and heating systems, the engineers put all the collected data into the software they developed. Of course, there was no need to be secretive anymore so they did this with consent of the management of public buildings they checked. Finally, the system of energy management was established. Everything was only one click away: with that one click, they could see the level of energy use and waste, and the software would provide the necessary information to take action to improve the energy management. Soon, the Energy Department became very popular among public institutions in Vrbas. Managers started to show interest in improving energy management in the premises of their institutions. In order to improve things even more, in 2015 the Energy Department adopted the ISO 50001 energy management standard, for energy management in the communal sector. This placed Vrbas among a very small number of municipalities in Europe and the only one in Serbia or the former Yugoslavia region applying these high standards.

The result was very good. As Vujović and Zečević say for Perspectives, in just one year, their system saved energy worth around ten million Serbian dinars (approximately eighty thousand euros), compared with 2009, which they took as the “base year”, prior to the introduction of their energy management system. In terms of energy savings, the result was 17 percent better than in 2009. For some, this may seem unimpressive, but one should bear in mind that this was done with no financial investment, only through energy management, in-depth controls of energy use and changing habits. Finally, we’re talking about a town with population of only 25,000 people. So thus far, this story seems like a “rose garden”. There are two innovative, creative and enthusiastic individuals who succeeded to develop a good idea, gained the sup-

port of the local authorities, got all the resources they needed, and established a system that actually works and fulfills very high standards. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, in some other part of the world or Europe – Zečević and Vujović would be promoted, appreciated and consulted at a national level. Other municipalities would implement their model, and because the mode is so efficient it would be soon adopted across the country. In Serbia, if there’s only a slight chance for things go wrong, things will go wrong.

First of all, the national Ministry of Energy refused to adopt their model nationally. Instead, the Serbian Government decided, in order to establish an energy management system, to import another model from Croatia. Vujović and Zečević offered their software for free, but, for some reason, the Government decided to pay for the version imported from Croatia. Of course, it could be argued that the Croatian system is better and more efficient, but that would be to forget that the Vujović and Zečević’s software is the only one in region with ISO 50001 standards.

Unbelievably, this was not the end of Vujović’s and Zečević’s troubles, nor is this the reason we described this story as a sad one. Actually, in January 2016 two of them were almost laid off!

Let’s see how that could even be possible...

In late 2015 the Ministry of Finance conducted an analysis of all the directorates at local level and decided that all the directorates that “are not successfully market-oriented must be shut down”. The Ministry of Finance came to the conclusion that Construction Directorate in Vrbas is one of those that are “unsuccessfully market-oriented”. When translated in ordinary language this actually means that they do not bring any money into the national budget. As the Energy Department was established as part of the Construction Directorate, it was shut down too.

However, although the Directorate really could not and did not work in a market-oriented way, its Energy Department could and did. The Department actually earned decent money, by doing analysis and elaborates, renting equipment and issuing so-called energy passports, which are a certificate of energy performance for buildings. Since 2012, every newly built house or building in Serbia should have an energy passport.



Thanks to their work and great achievements, Zečević and Vujović managed to build quite a reputation in the local community. So the local authorities did not want to give up on them. The Municipality of Vrbas decided to establish an Energy Department as their own local entity. In so doing, after everything they have done for Vrbas, Vujović and Zečević escaped being made redundant. But working as a part of a Municipality means that you do not have access to the financial resources that were available while they worked as a part of Construction Directorate and they could no longer do elaborates or issue energy passports. Even more sadly, they did not have access to the equipment that they used while establishing their energy management system. Also, when their Department was transferred to the Municipality, their salaries had to be aligned with others in local administration. At the moment, the creators of the most efficient energy management system in Serbia have salaries 30 percents lower than the Serbian average. In early December 2016 we visited Vujović and Zečević in the building of Vrbas Mu-

nicipality. They are using an office that is obviously old and poorly furnished, with only one computer and bunches of old folders and papers. They were waiting for the Municipality to make a decision about their future: to establish a public company for energy management or some other solution. We asked them why they persist in public sector, while many other underappreciated experts in Serbia either emigrate or start their own companies. "We are energy managers. If we leave, that would mean that all our efforts were for nothing. That's not energy efficient", Vujović says jokingly. Still, they both admit that their patience is not infinite. They will wait for a while and then they will consider other options. Meanwhile, they continue to offer their services for free. The citizens of Vrbas know about the work Vujović and Zečević have done, so when someone builds or renovates a house they come to see them to get advice about energy management. If needed, Zečević and Vujović visit houses and do the measurements and analysis with their own resources. Just like at the beginning. ■■■

# Roma Cargo Cyclists: Neglected Champions of Sustainable Development

by Ana Martinović, Danilo Ćurčić

Do you ever get tired of the social setting you belong to and start wondering how it would be to live some other life? If you could choose any other life, would you choose the one you are living now? Although, from time to time, we may not all feel free in our daily lives, most of us, simply by virtue of being members of society, have freedom of choice. This freedom means that an average member of a society, with a certain degree of social capital who has resolved pressing issues such as housing, food, healthcare, clothing, etc., has a wide array of choices from which to choose when deciding what kind of life he or she wants to lead. Whether we will exercise this freedom is entirely upon us. This is yet another manifestation of our freedom.

How many times a day do you see a Roma person on the street? The average male Roma person that you might come across in Belgrade or any other town in Serbia is somewhere between 30 and 40 years old, has a wife and children and most probably lives in an informal, Roma-only settlement somewhere on the outskirts of the town. Most probably, he lives in inadequate housing made from inadequate materials – sometimes just wood, cardboard and metal panels. He shares his single room house with the rest of his family, sometimes including his parents and siblings. He has no legal grounds for residing in the settlement, no construction permit or property rights over his home. Consequently, the settlement where he lives often has no access to electricity, limited access to water and inadequate sanitation. In the wintertime, due to the lack of electricity, they likely use a woodstove for heating, which is a huge risk to the children and sometimes leads to tragic accidents and the loss of lives.

This way of life, often romanticized as nomadic and free spirited, is actually anything but romantic. It means living in informal settlements, with the constant threat of being forcibly evicted from your self-build home – the only roof many Roma can look forward to having over

their heads. Roma settlements are often located either very far away from the local public services (schools, hospitals, markets, etc.), or in the midst of already established non-Roma settlements, which sometimes leads to conflict with non-Roma communities.

School dropout rate among Roma children who live in informal settlements is very high. Many Roma children only complete the first few grades of elementary school. Many do not attend school regularly, often failing grades, and those that do attend school regularly, in all likelihood, will enjoy minimal integration with non-Roma children. Further, a very high proportion of children attending special schools, which are for children with learning impairments, are Roma. Roma children are placed in special schools for a variety of reasons. Some Roma children (with or without learning impairments) are referred by regular schools. In other cases, Roma parents choose to send their children to special schools. Judging by the number of Roma children in special schools, one might conclude that overall percentage of Roma children with learning impairments is relatively high<sup>1</sup>. It is, however, very disputable that parents who choose to enrol their children in special schools are making an informed decision.

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Frequently, parents make the decision to transfer their children to a special school because they believe their child will not be bullied there for being Roma, rather than because of the long-term educational impact of this kind of education. Pedagogical assistants, which were introduced to the educational system with the aim of enhancing learning among Roma children and supporting their integration are understaffed and cannot cope with the many challenges that integration of Roma and other children present.

One might state a valid argument: that at least primary education is free (as well as being obligatory) and therefore there should be no excuse for not attending elementary school. However, it should be borne in mind that Roma children who live in informal settlements live in very different day-to-day life circumstances than non-Roma children. The vicinity of schools, living conditions, affordability of clothing and books and the support of the family are all factors to be taken into account when assessing why Roma children drop-out of school. Furthermore, discrimination remains one of the most pressing issues in the Serbian education system<sup>2</sup>.

Adequate housing and education are just two economic and social rights that Roma people have limited or no access to; but seen as part of the bigger picture, these issues trigger a whole chain of events that affect the life of an individual in a long run. Lack of formal education deprives you of becoming an accepted member of the society – in addition to lacking social capital, you also end up lacking the basic skills necessary for participation in the labour market. Employment issues combined with racial discrimination against access to employment render such people socially vulnerable. In theory social vulnerability in combination with poverty should make you eligible for social welfare assistance. According to current legal provisions, in order to obtain social welfare assistance, one must submit a list of documents to support the claim for social welfare assistance. Even after obtaining social welfare assistance, it is not enough to cover basic living costs, such as utilities, food and medicine.

So one might ask – is there any way out? Going back to our average Roma person, you have to wonder what it is that they do to support their families and ultimately survive.

Among the most impoverished Roma in Serbia, one approach to overcoming the abovementioned problems is the use of cargo bicycles, old motorcycles and trolleys to generate income. This started as the Roma community's way out from the widespread social exclusion, discrimination and lack of employment opportunities they face in Serbia. According to some estimates, at least eight thousand Roma families in Serbia depend on this type of economic activity<sup>3</sup>. However, the collection of secondary raw materials also goes hand in hand with a number of challenges – from health and traffic safety risks to social stigma and finally potential misdemeanour fines for secondary raw materials collectors. The life expectancy of secondary raw materials collectors is almost thirty years less than that of the rest of population in Serbia – only forty six years. With the price of one kilogram of recyclable paper at between one and a half and four Serbian dinars and a workday of at least eleven hours, the collectors of secondary raw materials are “one of the most exploited category of workers, with the lowest pay rate”<sup>4</sup>. The social benefit of their work is, however, immense – the collection of secondary raw materials with cargo bicycles presents a perfect example of the green economy. With a zero CO<sub>2</sub> footprint and the collection of recyclable materials, its ecological benefits are undisputable. The economic and social benefits are also significant. The collection of secondary raw materials is often the only way for the most disadvantaged members of the Roma community to generate income.

Furthermore, the model of generating income while releasing no CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere could also be replicated for other, better paid and less stigmatized work. This could include creating a green network of small-scale movers for the delivery of goods by bicycle and other bicycle delivery services. Greater use of cargo bicycles would also generate greater demand for bike repair shops, reduce traffic congestions and, finally, boost the local economy. However, the perception of Roma secondary raw materials collectors reminds us once again of their position in society – as much as their work is socially beneficial, it is still extremely underpaid “dirty work”, accompanied by numerous prejudices and open or concealed discrimination<sup>5</sup>. The question remains – what is behind this perception? Is the problem that these

green activities started in Roma communities first or the fact that the majority of Serbian society still struggles to understand concepts of sustainable development and consequently cannot recognize genuine green economy models?

Without access to decent education, very limited employment opportunities, deplorable housing conditions and insufficient social protection, Roma cargo cyclists have become champions of Serbia's disastrously underdeveloped recycling industry. In doing so, they recognized the opportunities, relied on their own skills and demonstrated that sustainable development does not necessarily require large scale transitions, but rather the stimulating and advancing of already existing economic activities and initiatives<sup>6</sup>. ■■■

<sup>1</sup> Some estimates say that there is up to 80% of Roma children in "special schools", see: Government of Serbia, Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia, online, available at: <http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Strategija-EN-web-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Regular Annual Report of the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, online, available at: <http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/en/reports/>

<sup>3</sup> Data from the presentation by the YUROM Center: "Status and Rights of Roma in the Traffic of Modified Vehicles and Carts – Problem Solving" at a conference held on 5 July 2014 in Belgrade.

<sup>4</sup> Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia, p. 25, online, available at: <http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Strategija-SR-web-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Damjan Rehm Bogunović, Danilo Čurčić, Vladimir Čurčić, *Moving Out of Poverty: From Waste Picking to Sustainable Mobility, Cargo Cyclists and Secondary Raw Material Collectors in Belgrade*, project brochure, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, Belgrade, October 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

# Urban Mobility: Bicycles with no Path

by Jovana Gligorijević

Despite car-centric public policies, in many cities across Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina more and more people are riding bicycles. This is definitely good news, given that bicycles are a green mobility mode, the cheapest way of transport, and also the healthiest for commuters. Still, there are many obstacles – lack of cycle tracks and infrastructure, serious safety issues, etc. Drivers and walkers in this part of the world often do not understand cyclists, which leads to many additional problems. For example, even where there are cycle tracks, it is common to see people walking in them and yelling if a cyclist shows up. Obviously, the question is how to promote cycling and inspire more people to use bicycles. Luckily, in many cities in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are people and organizations actively working to promote cycling.

According to Zoran Bukvić of the Belgrade based organisation Streets for Cyclists (*Ulice za bicikliste*), Belgrade does not have a cycling tradition, at least not in last 50 years. In Belgrade about one per cent of all journeys are by bike, a rate that has doubled in the last 10 years.

“First of all, I would point out the lack of a coherent network”, says Bukvić. “The new and old parts of the city are not connected with cycling infrastructure at all, and the old part of the city centre does not have any cycling tracks or lanes. If we consider that the old part is still the central business district, with all the institutions such as university, museums, theatres, the city and state administration, it is an attraction zone and cyclists do not have a safe route to get there. The same goes for cyclists from the old part of the town trying to get to the new and flourishing New Belgrade, which does have bicycle paths; but it’s difficult to get there.”

Tihomir Dakić from the Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina) based Centre for Environment explains that the increased number of commuters using bicycles is connected to the financial situation in our countries. It also helps that bicycles are promoted as something “good, positive and fashionable”. According to Dakić, de-

voted cycle-activists and organisations are to thank for this: “If we would like to make this cycle-wave bigger and permanent, a vast list of stakeholders should be involved and we should work together on more cycling-friendly policies and laws”.

On the other hand, Marko Trifković from Bicycle Initiative Novi Sad believes that popular and visible actions like promotions and bike rides have a limited lifetime and ceiling. Better road traffic policies supported by proper financing and implemented through intersectoral cooperation are the real basis of long-term success. “It can literally change the city. In one moment, we also have to decisively stop with bad ideas and practices. Mandatory safety equipment deters people from cycling as much as bad maintenance of infrastructure or lack of it. It is not always about what we are selling. Policy makers need to understand why cyclists are ‘buying’ cycling”, says Trifković.

## Help from the authorities

When it comes to policy makers, cooperation with them is *sine qua non* for the further development of cycling infrastructure. But not everything depends on them, so there is also a question: are we looking to

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Critical Mass in Belgrade, photo: Bogdan Spasojević

the public authorities too much for help? What kind of partnerships do we need?

In Belgrade, Streets for Cyclists maintain regular contact with the local authorities, but, as Bukvić suggests, there are other ways, such as campaigns, to encourage cycling and walking. Given that two-thirds of car journeys are less than 5 km, a lot of car-use could easily be replaced by cycling, public transport and walking. Streets for Cyclists implemented a campaign titled *Samo ne autom* (Anything but a car), which, Bukvić explains, encouraged employers to compete between themselves and encourage employees to commute by walking or cycling: “We engaged forty companies and institutions with four hundred employees, and achieved four thousand kilometres of cycling and walking in one day!”

Cyclists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or at least in Banja Luka, do not ask the public authorities for any kind of help, except to fulfil their obligations within their framework. According to Tihomir Dakić, one of those obligations is to find time and make space for quality discussion about developing cycling as a mode of urban mobility: “Our initiatives are mostly working on bottom-up influence, but in the last couple of years we have started working on top-down influence as well, and the work of

and with local authorities remains a challenge.” Most local and national organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina working on transport issues or promotion of cycling are already connected within European or global networks. According to Dakić, they have strong individuals and organisations working these issues, but they lack networking within the country and the region among these organisations: “We, in neighbouring countries, are unquestionably much closer to each other, in regard to the similarity of the problems we face and the way we are trying to solve them, than we are to some EU countries. I believe that we should work more on building up a network that will connect all the important individuals and NGOs in order to have a stronger voice and better present ourselves to other European networks, but above all to have greater impact on national strategies and policies”.

Still, as Marko Trifković points out, cyclists and cycling organisations are local people offering help and guidance in solving cycling problems, not searching for help: “Given that we are not profitable organizations and initiatives, we need resources. Partnerships with cycling companies, small business owners, etc., are well appreciated, but scarce. Small initiatives have needs for many things: people, mon-

ey, space, design, community and volunteer management, etc.”

## Citizens as frenemies

As mentioned, one of the many problems faced by cyclists in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is the lack of understanding and knowledge among fellow citizens. Beside the constant battles with authorities, there is also another: With six hundred thousand registered motor vehicles in Belgrade and one hundred and thirty thousand in Novi Sad, it's a no-brainer that most people want more parking places rather than bicycles. And this is the point at which things turn purely political. All those motor vehicle owners are seen by Zoran Bukvić as potential voters: “Although our officials often travel and some of them are familiar with sustainable urban mobility trends in Western Europe, it takes courage to make politically unpopular decisions such as removing parking places, increasing the price of parking or zoning city districts”. Bukvić points out that all the current political actors are prone to it, often yielding to the demands of car drivers: “That kind of behaviour leads to populism, which will cost us a lot if we don't build a political consensus that cars have to be on the bottom of the traffic pyramid”.

Marko Trifković gives a further explanation for the lack of cycling culture: car culture and habits developed for decades unopposed, while cycling was pushed, even by urban design, more towards sports and as a substandard transport choice. Where cycle paths were built, they were built to move cyclists aside and speed up motor traffic: “Also it is easier to form a good habit than to change an already formed bad habit. We cannot expect people to adopt more sustainable transport choices just because they recognize the benefits to the public interest, if they feel more comfortable in their car. While we carry responsibility for our personal choices, many of us are imposed by our environment”. Bukvić adds that this point of view lacks a more holistic approach: “The benefits of cycling are not discussed properly, so there are a lot of things to be explained to the wider audience”.

## Changing policies for changing habits

When it comes to raising awareness, Dakić is more direct in addressing possible solutions: no matter how many people want to drive a car in the city centre, some things should be forbidden and restricted: “This is how we could change people's habits.” Finally, what do we mean when we talk about cycling? Why is it, if at all, important for the environment and urban development? And, most importantly, how do we achieve all the goals that we have put in front of ourselves in order to promote cycling? One of the biggest mistakes and misunderstandings about cycling is made by the media: they keep presenting it as a sporting activity, instead of as a means of transport. In recent decades cycling commuting infrastructure was not developed and cycling promotion and advocacy was mostly left to sporting and recreational groups, clubs and federations. Additionally, as Dakić says, there is also a “status symbol” problem: “Cycling is perceived in our countries as a vehicle for poor and unsuccessful people. Owning a car is success and a sign of prestige that shows our financial and social circumstances.”

But even if the public perceived cycling in a more positive way, there are still terms and concepts like sustainable urban mobility that the majority of citizens do not understand. A possible solution, or at least a part of a solution, could be, as Marko Trifković suggests, stronger citizens' cycling organizations and better cycling policies oriented towards average people and their lifestyles, interests, needs. He also thinks that cycling advocacy organizations need to set a vision that drives them: “If we aim for a society that cycles and is sustainable, we don't aim for cheap parking places, wide roads, motorized city centres or cycling safety equipment”.

Experiences from other countries, where cycling culture is more developed, tell us that the more cyclists there are on the streets the safer they will be. In such places drivers are more accustomed to cyclists and pay more attention. Therefore, there is no need to invent new policies in order to develop a cycling culture; rather, we can learn from other countries' experiences and implement the best ideas in our own local context. ■■■

# Culture in Public Space: "Do it Yourself" Philosophy

by Iva Čukić

In recent years there has been an evident increase in activism through cultural and artistic production in the cities of the former Yugoslavia. The reduction of public space and the privatization of public goods, aggravated social inequalities, the increase of unemployment and existential insecurity, especially among young people, has led a variety of groups and individuals to take action toward forming new spaces and forms of sociability, manifested through distinctive forms of work, self-organization, social engagement and calls for debate. Propelled by the need for new forms of spatial engagement in diverse settings, free from the pressures of the neo-liberal economy, consumerism, censorship, sterile city events, comfort and convenience, the engagement of civil society is aimed at creating new spaces for social activity and cultural and artistic production. Precisely on account of this need for new urban sociability, public space is observed as a place for participation and debate on creating new opportunities. Activities infused with these ideas are filling the public space with new meanings and relations.

Public space is space that each individual is entitled to access and use for activities that do not infringe upon the rights of other groups or individuals who also use that space. Construed in this manner, public space and activities that occur in it reflect city life. The nature and diversity of activities undertaken in public space can be interpreted in numerous ways, depending on their initiators. However, there has been a noticeable increase of site-specific works, performances and participatory forms of cultural-artistic activities that cultivate tactics and methods for taking over urban public spaces and community par-

ticipation in social and physical space. We see these types of activities as part of the "do-it-yourself" philosophy, where performances become space-producing elements. Although the concept of space-production provokes many debates, here it will be limited to the observation that public space is not understood based on physical elements that define it, but rather as a product of human activity and social significance. This imparts a symbolic reaction of social creation on public space, making it a reproduction of everyday life, a medium and a product of social engagement.

## Street Gallery in Belgrade

Among the numerous examples of the use of public space as a place of contemporary cultural and artistic production and for provoking dialogue within a community is the Street Gallery, which was established in a once abandoned and forgotten passage in the heart of Belgrade. After two years of negotiations and persistence by the Ministry of Space / Mikro Art collective, the municipality of Stari Grad approved the temporary use of a passage by Mikro Art, and undertook to reconstruct/rehabilitate that space. Thus, this abandoned, unused space in the city centre was improved and enriched by the opening of the Street Gallery, which will be marking its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017. In the course of these five years, the Street Gallery has organized over 150 events – exhibitions, festivals, concerts, workshops for children, cinema screenings and the like. In addition to intensive cooperation on the independent cultural scene, this gallery enabled individuals and collectives, whose work is based on critical thinking, to work and cooperate





Street Gallery, photo: Dušan Rajić

with the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, Cultural Centre of Belgrade, October salon, ULUPUDS (Association of Applied Arts Artists and Designers of Serbia), Remont (Independent Artistic Association), BINA (Belgrade International Architecture Week), and others. Artists and groups using this space open and deliberate on socially and politically related subjects, thus surpassing the mere exhibition function of the gallery. The collectives' ambition has been to set an example through which to draw attention to the huge potential of abandoned spaces, and, at the same time, usurp city spaces with the aim of initiating dialogue and encouraging long-term changes to the urban fabric.

### Umetnomobil (Artmobile)

Recently we had the opportunity to see new initiative, *Umetnomobil* (Artmobile), also in Belgrade, which represents "a special medium on wheels, created by the swift operation of special-art-forces". This unusual example of artistic work in public space emerged from the need to create new ways of communication that will engage the community in current and marginalized issues and promote community participation in unusual places and spaces. The Artmobile is engaged in various parts of the city, from the city centre to suburbs, providing space for visual/fine art, music, and engaged programmes that inspire dialogue within the local communities and neighbourhoods it visits. Oriented toward experimentation, the Artmobile programme entails thematic content-filled

excursions, visits to Roma settlements, workshops with local people, production of the KUPEK programme (for those who wish to see beyond their local streets), free rides and emergency interventions that engage special-art-forces, who are always on stand-by. The manner in which public space is used and exposing relevant issues are added values of this initiative.

### KC PUNKT

Another place on the map of cultural and artistic activism in the former Yugoslavia is Nikšić, the second-largest town in Montenegro. The people of Nikšić are intrinsically inclined toward speaking in superlatives about their hometown, the people who live there, their achievements and their courage throughout history. These urban legends make up the city's spirit. After frequent visits, one realizes that the energy of people there actually is superlative, especially in light of unfavourable circumstances, which includes decrepit infrastructure, record-high unemployment and brain drain.

Despite all of this, in 2015 a group of young artists, political scientists, jurists, journalists and economists formed the Cultural Centre Punkt, with the intention of enriching the town's cultural offering, shake-off the apathy prevailing among most of the inhabitants, and breathe new life into forgotten and abandoned parts of the town. One of their first activities was to restore a devastated social and cultural centre for army personnel (*Dom Vojske*) in the town centre. Activating this space involved

adapting several rooms into a gallery and rehabilitating the grand into a venue for music events. However, despite a rich programme and great efforts to revive the former *Dom vojske*, the Ministry of Science and the municipality of Nikšić have given the right of use of the building to the *Tehnopolis* business centre, and KC Punkt has been left with only an informal agreement to use the basement of the town's city hall. Despite the lack of any kind of relevant support, the desire to improve their urban surroundings has not waned. With great enthusiasm and minimum resources, this group of young people have managed to organize numerous cultural and artistic events in various spaces. In addition to the city hall, the group uses other public spaces, abandoned and open-air areas, emphasizing the great potential of these spatial resources for various not-for-profit activities. Their most notable activities include workshops for children and youth, revival of the City Orchestra, Critical Mass (bicycling), exhibitions, creation of murals on the worn-down façades of houses in the town, and activities based on the principles of a sustainable city, the importance of the environment and citizens' participation in the creation of their surroundings. These examples are just a part of the many initiatives, alternative practices and struggles for space that are unfolding across the

territory of the former Yugoslavia. Some are more successful than others; some are only beginning; some are having a tremendous impact; and some are having no impact at all on the context in which they take place. However, the one thing they all have in common is the determination to provoke dialogue, to offer space for the exchange of ideas and to create new social relations. Although burdened by the insecurity of their working conditions, constantly searching for and exploring ways to create financial sustainability and to realize their programmes, civil society initiatives in the field of culture strive to socially engage and offer cultural programmes to the communities in which they operate. Thanks to their enthusiasm and readiness to work in insecure conditions, they deserve credit for much of the total cultural offering in the cities of the former Yugoslavia and for producing social and physical space in line with articulated needs, interests and desires of a variety of communities.

This kind of engagement generates new models for activating public space and socialization by creating a platform for exchanging ideas and forming critical opinion. At the same time it shapes the social community in which the interaction takes place through common activities and recognition of the right to social and physical space. ■■■

# Retrofitting and Reusing: From a Military Barrack to Community Centre

by Dušica Radojčić

Visitors are always impressed when they come to the Rojc Community Centre for the first time. Its physical dimensions immediately strike the eyes of visitors, particularly its external and internal shape, which speaks clearly about the building's military past and purpose. Long hallways, easy to get lost in, once had dormitories and classrooms on both sides. The windows in the hallway all face the internal prison-like yard. As an aesthetic objection to this architecture, the hallways were decorated and painted when the building was retrofitted. But most striking is the fact that, today, the Rojc Community Centre is home to 110 civil society organizations and radiates an atmosphere of great activity and energy. The building is governed through an innovative model of public-civil management, which makes Rojc even more unique.

## How it all happened

Thanks to its geographical location, Pula has been strategically important during various historical periods, including periods of rule by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Italy, and the Republic of Yugoslavia. This strategic importance is the reason why the city's military heritage is so prominent in its built environment. Most of the former-military buildings from the preceding eras are today the property of the state. There is still no plan for the utilization of most of them, nor for handing them over to the local public administration or other interested actors. They remain vacant and abandoned. The passing of time and vandalism have greatly contributed to the fact that it has become financially difficult to restore and

re-purpose them. The number of buildings and entire built-up areas that are currently empty and devastated is remarkably wasteful.

The former-military barracks Karlo Rojc (named after a Second World War hero) – colloquially called Rojc, and today the Rojc Community Center, is situated in the centre of Pula. Its astonishing proportions are probably the reason why Rojc has not been subjected to the kind of commercialization plans that have been proposed for many other former-military spaces in the town, which are now decaying because of the failure to realize these illusory tourism development projects.

The building has a rectangular shape, with a surface area of 17,000 m<sup>2</sup>, not including the internal yard, with three floors on the southern side and five on the northern side. The external yard covers a further 29,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Rojc was built during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a naval college. This purpose was maintained under Italian rule, when it served as a cadet school. Under Yugoslavia, it first became a Partisan engineering school and then in 1976 was transformed into military barracks. The Yugoslav Army left the building in 1991, after which Rojc was used to accommodate war refugees. Following the departure of the refugees, the building was abandoned and fell into a state of devastation. In 1997, squatters – civil society organizations – moved in. During this period the residents of Pula would avoid the building and its surroundings, repelled by the dark, dirty building and its terrible hygienic conditions, settled by what were perceived as “nasty” people. It was also in this period that associations residing in the

building started restoring “their” spaces, and cleaning actions were organized to rehabilitate some of the common areas, such as the long hallways and the external yard. The precondition for all these activities was the availability of free water and electricity, which neither the owner – the Ministry of Defence – nor the utility companies ever turned off after the abandonment of the building.



Rojc Community Center, photo: [arhiva.Rojcnet.pula.org](http://arhiva.Rojcnet.pula.org)

The City of Pula, even though formally not the owner of the building, began to realize that it was impossible to deny the fact that the building was being used by more and more organizations. As a solution, in 1999, they offered to contractually formalize the utilization of the spaces. However, the attempt to make the organizations pay rent was unsuccessful. The City of Pula also began to help restore some of the common spaces, such as the toilets and hallways; introduced a janitor’s service during the day; organized a night guard service; and provided cleaning and other services. Finally, in 2007, the Ministry of Defence declared the building as unfit for military purposes and agreed to give it to the City of Pula for non-profit purposes. The organizations with premises in building pay their own electricity and phone bills, and those that use a significant amount of water also pay the water bill. At the end of 2016, the City of Pula adopted a decision on minimal rent payments for spaces leased to civil society organizations.

Today, Rojc is home to 110 non-profit organizations. Such a wide variety of organizations working under the same roof is unique. Most of these organisations work in the fields of art and culture. The second most represented category is sport and rec-

reation. In addition, Rojc is home to organizations for children; people with disabilities; national minorities; technical culture; the environment; war veterans; and others. The associations resident at Rojc organize many events in the building and outside it, such as festivals, concerts, exhibitions, theatre, and other public events.

### An innovative participatory model for the management of public goods

In 2008, after years of dissatisfaction with the management of the building as well its related financial management, Rojc’s settlers organized a large public protest. Their main objections were the irrational expenditure of funds on poor building maintenance and the City of Pula’s lack of both interest in or capacity to create and implement a development policy for Rojc. The same year, the Rojc settlers began an initiative to effectively manage the building. The users of the space continued to draw attention to irrational spending and ineffective financial management, and proposed remedial measures along with a counter-measure – to create a common body with the power to control and decide on expenditure on and the management of the building. Prompted by its unsuccessful management and by the occupants’ initiative to get involved in decision-making mechanisms and to take over part of the responsibility for management (which had been solely in the hands of public authorities until that point), the City of Pula established Rojc Coordination in 2008 – a body in charge of the building’s management. The committee consists of three representatives from among the organizations resident at Rojc and three representatives of the City of Pula.

The beginning of the coordination body’s work was marked by numerous obstacles and disagreements, mostly caused by the lack of willingness of the City of Pula to truly involve Rojc representatives in decision-making with respect to financial management. This situation resulted in the associations revolting again, culminating in another protest gathering in February 2009. In the negotiations that followed, the Rojc occupants sought full partnership rights with the City.

The number of representatives of the Rojc Alliance (which works in the interests of the building’s occupants) and the City of

Pula in the Coordination body is equal, so decisions are not taken by a voting majority but through deliberation and consensus. Rojc representatives are delegated by the Rojc Alliance Assembly, and the representatives of the City are appointed by the mayor. Their mandate lasts two years. Every year, the City allocates money from its budget, to be used for the maintenance of the building and necessary services, which together with revenue from renting the roof to mobile operators for antennas, amounts to approximately two hundred thousand euros per year. Costs include a janitor's service, night guards, a cleaning service, insurance, accounting services, etc. The role of the coordinating body is to monitor expenditure and ensure efficient management, and to decide on maintenance and investment priorities. The users of the premises have an interest in ensuring its efficient management and to improve the overall condition of the building. The advantage of the partnership with the City is the provision of steady budget financing. This management model also ensures the participation of interested occupants in the Rojc Community Center's management; a steady institutional framework and budgetary financing for the building's basic maintenance; and also public control over a public good and public spending. The involvement of citizens and stakeholders in the management of public goods is one of the most efficient ways to solve the problem of the perception of the public administration as a "bad master", and dispels the myth that the privatization of public goods is the only alternative to poor public administration.

The participatory management model of a public good, as described, is much more effective than cases where management powers reside in the hands of indifferent, bureaucratically-minded, and often corrupt public administrators. Yet, it is far from perfect, and the associations continue to seek to revise and improve it. Its main weakness is the timeliness and inefficacy in executing decisions, and its limited possibilities for public control over public procurement procedures. The power to implement joint decisions remains in the hands of the City of Pula, which is burdened by the usual *modus operandi* of public administrations. Several years ago, the associations prepared a study on the development of the Rojc management model, and proposed the creation of a hybrid public-civil

institution – in other words, the institutionalization of the City's partnership with the civil society sector. Such a solution would solve the problem of the long term uncertainty of the present management model, which relies on the good will of the present political structure. The City of Pula has recognized the importance of the Rojc Community Centre and has supported it for years. A hybrid public-civil institution would be another step in the same direction. In this process, dialogue is the most important element, as well as mutual trust, which can, of course, generate other solutions to current problems.

### Rojc Alliance

In 2012, the Rojc Alliance was founded with the aim of strengthening cooperation among associations in Rojc, developing common programmes and improving both the management model in cooperation with the City of Pula and working conditions at the Community Centre. The focus has been on the further development of all aspects of the centre. In just a few years, in cooperation with the City of Pula, the first common space in the building – the so called *Living Room* – was restored and furnished, and its management was awarded to the Rojc Alliance for 10 years. Its purpose is to enable organizations at Rojc and other non-profit associations and initiatives to present their work. The Rojc Alliance launched a website, Rojcnet, and regularly publishes a bulletin, *Veznik* – People of Rojc. 103 programmes were implemented in the Living Room in 2015. That same year, a number of documents were produced for the realization of future plans, including mapping the resources and potential of the community centre; a sustainability plan; a plan for the development of social entrepreneurship; and a marketing plan. The Rojc Alliance has taken responsibility for developing an artists in residence programme, as well as a hostel, and for those purposes has agreed a 10 year contract with the City of Pula for the necessary space at Rojc. The plan for the future of the centre includes an urban garden, a bicycle repair shop, a community cafe and a children's playground. The Rojc Alliance has become a member of the network of European cultural centres *Trans Europe Halles*, and in 2017, will organize a meeting at Rojc of 200 representatives of cultural centres from across Europe. ■■■

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