

Necessary, and yet Absent

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Despite numerous undisputed benefits of cycling as a mobility mode, in Belgrade, “His Royal Highness the Car” is still the absolute sovereign with not much chance of changing this any time soon.

Judging by highly irrelevant and personal impression, of the author of these lines, conceived in his own social circle, citizens of Belgrade make their acquaintance with the bicycle, as kids, before school age. If the conditions are met, and there is space for it, bicycles are often used, first in the company of adults, and later, when they are a bit grown up, in the company of other children, and, as time goes by, the bicycle is then slowly rotting away, only to end up in a storage room or a cellar, attic or a terrace, with a tendency to get used only several times a year. Actually, and this is still an utterly irrelevant personal impression, bicycles seems to be not a transport mode, but an expensive kids' *toy*, which every child, *grows out of*, eventually.

Even if it were not so, what is left for a teenager or a student living in Karaburma, Žarkovo, or Banjica, but to simply stop riding their bicycles, and even if they wish to, where would they cycle? To reach the nearest bicycle lane, they need to cover miles and miles of streets, and bad roads, riding next to drivers who are mostly not bike-friendly, nor are they used to bicycles. In Serbia, there are towns which can serve as positive examples when it comes to cycling, such as Subotica, Novi Sad or Šabac. However, the capital, Municipality of Novi Beograd apart, has little to show for. The city hasn't done much to make citizens consider bicycle as a mobility mode, rather than just a toy.

In Western Europe, generally speaking, the benefits of urban cycling have long been recognised, from reducing traffic jams, and consequently improved air quality, to personal health benefits. Bearing in mind the state of public health sector, and the fact that Serbia has one of the highest rates of deaths caused by cardiovascular deceases, this benefit of regular cycling should not be undermined. However, in conversation with different cycling associations, it becomes clear that (lack of) infrastructure is certainly not the only problem and obstacle to cycling: there is also the lack of political will to change the conditions. The perception of transport is a “fossilized” and public bodies srongly favour cars and motorized transport and then there is the issue safety, that is, the perception of cyclists' safety.

“In every town there is a certain percentage of cyclists which will cycle no matter what, these are recreational cyclists and bicycle enthusiasts. These account for less than one percent of all trips done in the city. If you wish to increase the percentage, then you must create proper conditions. In Belgrade, the percentage is just around one percent, which is an increase, because in 2007 and 2008 it was around 0,55 percent. This is the portion of the total number or trips in the city, for purposes of both recreation and transport” explains

Zoran Bukvić, president of the NGO Ulice za bicikliste¹. “Depending on the neighbourhood, Budapest is around 10 percent, Ljubljana 12, Zagreb 3 to 4 as well as Novi Sad. In Vienna it is around 7 percent and they are actively working on increasing the numbers. If we go more north, to Denmark and the Netherlands, the percentage goes as high as 50 percent, depending on the neighbourhood, country average is around 20 percent and more” points out Mr Bukvić.

Speaking of safety, he points out that cyclists can even objectively be safe, but do not feel safe because no measures related to cyclists are taken – the traffic is not being slowed down, no speed bumps are put in place, the streets are not narrowed down, slow zones are not adequately marked etc.

“Every town has a different set of problems. For example, in Pirot, 10 percent of all trips are conducted using a bicycle. It is up to each town to choose its policies, and all of these measures must be conceived by local administration. To be honest, in the City Transport Secretariat² I did not encounter a similar perception. They ‘worship’ the circulation of car traffic, and do not dare touch parking spaces downtown. It has nothing to do with any administration in particular, the mantra of 5 000 parking spaces missing in Belgrade is constantly repeated. One must then ask: what is the limit? Because, you will always have a demand for parking spaces, and it will grow, because everyone will wish to take their cars to the city centre. The more you make infrastructure for automobiles, which demands huge funds and investments, the more automobiles will be used. It is a well know fact and it’s called induced demand. Whether you make new roads or new parking spaces, it calls for more cars. And then you create a vicious circle in which you constantly make new infrastructure, and the traffic jams are growing. Authorities in Belgrade must think their priorities through; make a clean cut and say: today there will be no parking spaces here. The real issue is: what do you want? Do you want traffic jams, or do you wish to have people on bicycles, which is healthier, which will help the healthcare system, ease the traffic congestion and reduce noise and pollution?” wonders Mr Bukvić.

According to Danilo Ćurčić of NGO Bajsologija, the problem is much wider, and it cannot be solved by the City Secretariat alone. “Essentially, I think we need a change in perception of urban mobility. It is a question for multiple ministries, not just for the one in charge of traffic. For example, Ministry of Education: children in schools should learn that transport is not only about railways and cars. We need a new understanding of transport. There is no bike-sharing system, there is no consistent network of cycling lanes, or it is more for the purposes of recreation than for the purposes of transport. Even the part of the road designated for cycling (one meter from the edge of the road), is always in the worst condition, full of holes, and dirty with oil from buses, and the drivers often don’t overtake the cyclists while keeping the necessary distance. The whole approach is wrong, and the best illustration for this is the elevator for cyclists on Brankov bridge. It works longer hours during the summer holidays, presumably because school children at that time of year use

¹ Engl. Streets for cyclists.

² Ser. Sekretarijat za saobraćaj Grada Beograda

their bicycles more, for recreational purposes, whereas people ride their bicycles every day, whether it is summer or winter ” says Mr Ćurčić.

Exactly two years ago, in November 2014. Authors Danijel Vučković, Kosta Ćirić, Milan Stajić i Damjan Rehm Bogunović published an initial feasibility study of introducing a bike sharing system in the City of Belgrade. “Sustainable urban mobility stipulates that city adjusts to the movement of people not the movement of cars. That is why streets are seen primarily as public spaces, and only then as roads for motorised traffic. Such urban planning serves city residents whether they are car drivers or pedestrians, and is before anything else, local in scope. Sustainable mobility implies not only economic viability, but it also takes into account the environmental sustainability (e.g. air quality, noise) and spatial aspects of mobility such as affordability and social inclusion” it is written in the introduction to the study. The authors, point out that there is more than 600 cities which have introduced the bike sharing systems, which allows citizens to rent a bicycle in one place and leave it at a different location.

“The fundamental goal of a public bike sharing system is to integrate cycling in the transport system, so that a bicycle can become an everyday mobility mode. It is a new philosophy of movement which promotes simple, affordable, healthy and clean way of urban commuting. This public transport mode, with the help of modern, green technologies, uses the bicycle in a completely novel way”, the authors point out. After evaluating many of Belgrade’s planning documents they conclude: “There are still no planning documents which plan for a cycling network with all the necessary elements, in a wholesome strategic way.” According to their calculation, the total investment in a bike sharing system would be around 1,3 million Euros, of which, public investment would amount to under half a million.

“The results show that the project is not financially justified, and not sustainable, if one asses the money flow alone, but when considering broader economic sustainability, the project is viable” the authors write in Conclusion. “The project is of big importance for society because it raises awareness about environmental protection and promotes this mobility mode. Significant increase of road safety in long term, enhancing the quality of life and boosting city’s image from a touristic point of view and improving the public transport services, with a bike sharing system as one of its integral parts, making commuting time more reliable, lowering crime rates (statistics shows that cyclists are less often victims of attacks than pedestrians)”, the authors write and conclude: “There is no doubt that such project should be implemented as soon as possible.”

Instead of a conclusion we can remind ourselves of the news from couple of months ago: despite public outcry, in several locations in Novi Beograd, green surfaces were replaced by several hundred parking spaces. “As soon as possible” from the above mentioned Study will, apparently, have to wait.