

## THE URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS OF POST-YUGOSLAVIA: NEGOTIATING THE CONTEMPORARY CITY IN SARAJEVO, BELGRADE, AND ZAGREB

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### *Summary*

*The urban transformations taking place throughout the region of former Yugoslavia are best exemplified in the capitals of the once-communist federation's successor states. The recent urban developments in the cities of Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo illustrate the realities of contemporary societies in the Balkans and the socio-political shifts of the period of transition. The built environments of the newly capitalist countries serve as exaggerated, yet emblematic examples of nation-building projects and their deep entwinement with economic processes unfolding throughout post-communist South-Eastern Europe. However, the links between the post-socialist urban and national identity, as well as politics and economy, remain understudied.*

*In this paper, I enquire into the present-day urban transformations of Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb. I examine these cities within the context of post-Yugoslav economic and political space, exploring the particularities of the creation of built environments that*

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*no longer exist on the Yugoslav periphery, but now are at the centre of newly democratic societies. Through the investigation of the political, economic, and architectural particularities of Belgrade Waterfront and Zagreb Manhattan development projects, and Sarajevo City Center commercial complex, I examine the influx of foreign funds – mainly from the Middle East – and their impacts on the construction of regional urban centres. I argue that the modern-day capitals of post-Yugoslav states are developing as products of the interpolation of a communist past into the capitalist present characterised by the perpetual quest for “Europe”, and in line with the broader socio-political and architectural trends in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. In post-Yugoslavia, urban practices are problematically interwoven with politics: the cities simultaneously serve as displays of geopolitical change and catalysts for social transformation in post-socialist societies.*

*Keywords: Post-socialist city, urban transformations, Balkans, nationalism, Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Zagreb, Sarajevo*

### *Zusammenfassung*

#### TRANSFORMATIONSPROZESSE DER STÄDTE IN POST-JUGOSLAWIEN: AKTUELLE ENTWICKLUNGEN IN SARAJEWO, BELGRAD UND ZAGREB

*In den Hauptstädten der Nachfolgestaaten lassen sich die städtischen Transformationen im Gebiet des ehemaligen Jugoslawien am besten veranschaulichen. Die jüngsten Stadtentwicklungen in Belgrad, Zagreb und Sarajevo veranschaulichen die heutige gesellschaftliche Realität in den Balkanstaaten sowie die sozialen und politischen Veränderungen in der Transformationsphase. Die gebaute Umwelt der jungen kapitalistischen Staaten liefert oft überspitzte, aber symbolhafte Beispiele für das Projekt der Nationsbildung und deren enge Verflechtung mit den ökonomischen Prozessen, die im gesamten postkommunistischen Südosteuropa voranschreiten. Die Beziehungen zwischen postsozialistischer Identität auf städtischer und auf nationaler Ebene, ebenso wie jene zwischen Politik und Wirtschaft wurden bisher zu wenig untersucht.*

*In diesem Beitrag untersuche ich die aktuellen städtischen Transformationen von Sarajevo, Belgrad und Zagreb. Ich behandle diese Städte im Kontext des postjugoslawischen Raums, als Wirtschaftsraum als auch als politischer Raum. Dabei analysiere ich die Besonderheiten bei der Schaffung einer neuen gebauten Umwelt, die jetzt im Zentrum der neuen demokratischen Gesellschaften entsteht – und nicht mehr an der jugoslawischen Peripherie. Mittels einer Recherche über die politischen, ökonomischen und architektonischen Besonderheiten der Projekte „Belgrade Waterfront“ und „Zagreb Manhattan“ sowie des Einkaufszentrums „Sarajevo City Center“ untersuche ich den Zufluss ausländischen Kapitals – insbesondere aus dem Nahen Osten – und dessen Auswirkungen auf die Errichtung regionaler Stadtzentren. Ich argumentiere, dass sich die heutigen Hauptstädte der postjugoslawischen Staaten als Ergebnis des Nachwirkens der kommunistischen Vergangenheit in die kapitalistische Gegenwart entwickeln. Diese Entwicklung ist durch ein ewiges Streben nach „Europa“ – im Rahmen von umfassenderen sozialen, politischen und architektonischen Trends in Ost- und Südosteuropa – gekennzeichnet. Stadtentwicklung ist*

*in Post-Jugoslawien auf problematische Weise mit Politik verflochten: die Städte dienen sowohl als Schaufenster des geopolitischen Wandels als auch als Katalysatoren der sozialen Transformation in den postsozialistischen Gesellschaften.*

*Schlagwörter: Postsozialistische Stadt, städtische Transformationen, Stadtentwicklung, Balkanstaaten, Nationalismus, (Ex-)Jugoslawien, Belgrad, Zagreb, Sarajevo*

## 1 Introduction

In Yugoslav successor states, the formation of post-socialist countries and construction of their capital cities has been conducted under the burden of not only post-socialist politics and economy but also under the encumbrance of a post-war region afflicted with neoliberal rhetoric and discourse. The cities of Yugoslav successor states are nowadays battlegrounds of the twenty-first-century capitalism and nascent pluralist democracy: they illustrate the fractures of post-socialist transformations, and the clashes of the newly independent states with the hyper-capitalist economy, ethnic strife, and disenfranchisement of minorities. The recent colossal projects such as the Croatian *Zagreb Manhattan*, the Serbian urban renewal development *Belgrade Waterfront*, and the earlier Bosnian smaller-scale *Sarajevo City Center* complex exemplify the problematic of political and architectural shifts that are taking place in the post-socialist and post-Yugoslav world. These projects are lauded by their creators as progressive and highly beneficial for local economy and culture, yet, without exception, the mammoth projects in Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Belgrade have brought upon charges of corruption and illegality. The urban projects in these cities demonstrate the struggles of the socio-economic ailments of the early twenty-first century and the cycle in which political and economic shifts influence architecture and the architecture in return conditions economy and politics.

In this paper, I study the three post-Yugoslav states' capitals by analysing massive urban development projects that have altered the architectural, cultural, and political cityscape of post-socialist cities in the Western Balkans. I utilise the theoretical framework of a post-socialist urban space, and I analyse the notion of post-socialist city and post-Yugoslav urban transformations as entwined with nationalism. I inquire into the actors in these urban renewal projects, and I ask the following: who are the beneficiaries of these developments and what is the role of local governments, investors, and planners? To conduct this inquiry, I explore the concept of a financialised city as established by THEURILLAT et al. (2016), and I utilise the notion of weak and decontextualised capital anchoring to identify the actors in the formation and negotiation of post-socialist cities. In the analysis of the recent urban renewal projects in the Western Balkans, I also examine these cities as local centres – the capitals of Yugoslav successor states – and peripheries of Western European and global investments.<sup>1)</sup>

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<sup>1)</sup> Due to the contemporary context of the thematic, my sources are often from the domain of daily newspapers and journals, complementing the academic discourse on the post-socialist city.

## 2 Theorising the post-socialist city

While its definition remains tentative, if not contentious, the understanding and theorisation of a post-socialist city remain firmly tied with the equally challenging concept of its predecessor, the socialist city. Urban and architectural scholars have debated whether a socialist city had even existed and whether its characteristic dissimilarities were “sufficiently different from those of its counterpart in the developed capitalist world” to warrant such singular designation (HIRT 2013, p. 29). This discussion is not within the scope of this paper, and I employ the concept of a post-socialist city as an inescapable successor of its socialist precursor. I understand the post-socialist city as an urban and socio-economic product of the state-socialist politics and urbanism enmeshed with the hyper-capitalist economy of the early twenty-first century and the post-socialist states’ negotiations of the two.

In this essay, the concept of a post-socialist city is defined in the context of the transition from communist political regime to pluralistic democracy, and from a centrally planned economy – in the case of Yugoslavia, the economy of self-management – to free market. The formation of new formal and informal institutions has accompanied this transformation and is vital in the understanding of the post-socialist era and the contemporary urban space (NEDOVIĆ-BUDIĆ et al. 2006, p. 5). The urban developments in the post-socialist city have been characterised by the relaxation of control over spatial development, “so that a multitude of investors could access urban property markets more easily” (ibid., p. 6). In the post-socialist world, a defining factor of transformation is evident in the shift from a stricter state-based rule of a government to a process of governance, defined as a crossing of private and public sectors and with a focus on multi-stakeholder involvement. In this context, the post-socialist leaders envisioned urban planning to follow the rules of legitimacy and participation, accountability and transparency, as well as the introduction of regional and global actors. Still, these processes have only partly taken place; the analysis of post-Yugoslav cities shows that while post-communist governments have embraced regional and global investments, the inconsistent abidance to the rules of transparency, participation, and accountability has persevered. Consequently, due to the weakening of local institutions under the “effects of globalisation and neo-liberalism [...] the localities have been pushed to be innovative in making alliances and negotiating the conditions of their future development”, ultimately creating entire parts of cities to be constructed by investors and under lax regulations (NEDOVIĆ-BUDIĆ et al. 2006, p. 7).

To examine and theorise a post-socialist and post-Yugoslav urban space, I further employ the concept of a financialised city. The urban and economic geographer Thierry THEURILLAT – along with Nelson VERA-BUCHEL and Olivier CREVOISIER – writes in 2016 about processes of urban anchoring of financial capital and outlines the particularities of a financialised city, one in which the “value of the city corresponds to trading on the financial market” (THEURILLAT et al. 2016, p. 1510). In this process, the immobile assets such as buildings are transformed into liquid financial assets, with their architectural and urban functions paid no concern. THEURILLAT et al. further claim that in the case of a financialised city, the anchoring of capital is weak and decontextualised, allowing investors to “extract monetary value almost instantaneously in order to reinvest it elsewhere”; consequently, these projects become “dysfunctional and quickly lose monetary

value” (ibid., p. 1513). Traits outlined by THEURILLAT et al. can be partly identified in the post-Yugoslav capitals where the foreign influx of investments seems to follow the same trajectory: foreign funds are invested in the city to extract gain, yet they add minor, or no value to the urban fabric.

The post-socialist city in the region of former Yugoslavia exhibits further traits of THEURILLAT’s financialised city: the city is initially seen as a “trading room” by both foreign investors and local politicians, with the “extraction of quantified and comparative results as a basis for decision-making”, and with a minimal or none investment in heterogeneous urban features (THEURILLAT et al. 2016, p. 1511). In this context, the nature of the urban value of the new renewal development projects is comprehended as quantitative, “based on financial markets”, and compared with other assets (ibid.). My analysis of the post-socialist cities in the Balkans and the recent urban renewal investment projects shows the minimal focus of investors and political actors in producing space engineered for the intersection of different factors – cultural, social, economic, and political – and exhibits an almost exclusive emphasis on the capital value of these developments and their practically complete decontextualisation within the urban fabric of the former socialist city.

A single definition of a post-socialist urban space cannot be applied to all of the post-socialist cities. The degrees of variation are evident, and mainly so regarding the legality and transparency of the planning and construction process. In some countries, the period of transition has unearthed societies of oligarchs and autocrats, “where governments have retained significant authority over urban planning”, while in others we see “urban policies shaped by various commercial interests” (DIENER and HAGEN 2013, p. 489). In the Yugoslav successor states – with slight gradation concerning different countries in the region – the fusion between the two, the unearthing of oligarchs and submission to their and foreign commercial interests, is apparent. The local and national governments have maintained a high level of authority and are effectively guiding urban development projects; at the same time, urban development processes remain untransparent, and with minimal public participation.

The post-Yugoslav post-socialist cities differ from their East-Central European counterparts for two reasons: the permissible communism of Tito’s Yugoslavia and the decade of warfare that effectively ended the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation. The post-socialist cities in the Western Balkans are not only post-socialist; they are also post-Yugoslav and post-war. In the Yugoslav successor states, we see not only the introduction of free markets and a neo-liberal economy but also the quest for “Westernising” national identification, entwined with post-war reconstruction and intrinsically tied with the nation-building project. These cities in the Western Balkans remain inextricably intertwined with the “overt ‘nationalisation’ of urban space”, accompanied by the prevalent reassertion of “national identity and sovereignty” (DIENER and HAGEN 2013, p. 489). Here, we can theorise the notion of the national periphery as both symbolic and real, as it has persisted in the region for centuries, shifting appropriately through different ideological and global transformations. The historian Pamela BALLINGER argues that “new thematic groupings, like post-communist and post-socialist [...] de-throned spatial understandings in favor of temporal ones”, but that these new qualifications never really eradicated the “E/W divide but merely reconfigured and displaced it” (BALLINGER 2016, p. 45).

### 3 The end of socialist Yugoslavia

The post-Yugoslav successor states are irretrievably entwined with politics and economy of the Yugoslav federation. The Yugoslav socialism of self-management was unique in its freedoms as well as in its timid economic explorations of an open market.<sup>2)</sup> Under the auspices of an umbrella Yugoslav federation, the union's republics, diverse in their histories and cultural and urban heritage, swiftly embarked on the project of modernisation, urbanisation, and modernity.<sup>3)</sup> The economic historian György PÉTERI argues that this state-driven modernisation was characterised by a concept of a “take-off to modernity” from a place of great backwardness, typical of state-socialist countries throughout Eastern and South-Eastern Europe during the post-war years (PÉTERI 2004, p. 114). European state-socialist leaders envisioned a modernisation project of global scope and content. At the same time, the communist governments and their ideologues based their “global pretensions” on the notion of “catch up” with the advanced “core societies” of Western Europe and North America (ibid.). The particulars of Yugoslav politics of non-alignment and economic self-management created a unique socio-political and urban environment facilitating successful negotiations of the political periphery.

The Yugoslav architects built the federation urbanised and industrialised; its cities characterised by modernist architecture entwined with Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian urban heritage. By the end of the 1980s, the Yugoslav citizens identified themselves as European, living in the proverbial “heart of Europe”.<sup>4)</sup> Yet, the socialist federation was inching toward its demise. The Yugoslav “brotherhood and unity”<sup>5)</sup> came under threat and the country's new leaders forged the way of keeping the state united and functioning, ultimately failing at that quest; a “galloping economic crisis” engulfed the country (PERICA 2002, p. 92). The dissolution of the union already commenced in the western Yugoslav republics in 1991, and socialist Yugoslavia soon ceased to exist.

As the last decade of the twentieth century neared its end, the Yugoslav successor states – symptomatically referred as such to this day – transitioned from the economy of self-management to capitalism, from communism to fragile democracy. The period of transition brought upon the familiar post-socialist ailments: corruption, hyper-capitalism, poverty, and inequality. The wars ended in the Balkans by the end of the millennium, and the newly independent post-Yugoslav states sought to form new political and urban identities. This process proved inextricably tied with the nationalist negotiations of architectural production, the links between the built environment and ideology persistent. In the region, the early twenty-first century has shown that while the Yugoslav project of

<sup>2)</sup> For further reading, see SMILJKOVIC (1974): *Workers' Self-Management in Yugoslavia*. Belgrade: Federal Committee for Information.

<sup>3)</sup> For introductory reading into the architecture of socialist Yugoslavia, see KULIĆ et al. (2012): *Modernism In-Between. The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*.

<sup>4)</sup> Newspapers' articles commonly referred to Yugoslavia as not only a European country, but one in the “heart of Europe”. For reference, see PFAFF (1991): *Yugoslavia Strife Strikes at the Very Heart of Europe*.

<sup>5)</sup> “Brotherhood and unity”, a slogan developed during the Liberation War in Yugoslavia (1941–1945) and employed by the Yugoslav communists throughout the existence of the country. The slogan designated the official policy toward Yugoslav nations and national minorities and granted them equal standing before the law.

modernisation and grand public projects ended with the dissolution of the state, the relationship between politics and architecture, ideology and urban identity, remains present as ever.

#### 4 Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb: The architecture of post-socialism

The architecture of Bosnia and Herzegovina is unique in its mixture of different historical influences: the centuries of Ottoman rule and the brief yet prolific Austro-Hungarian period of urban development created a Sarajevo of mosques, small single-family houses, and Austrian apartment and institutional buildings. The post-war modernisation unearthed simple and understated modernisms in the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The early 1990s brought upon unforeseen violence and four years of unprecedented destruction befell Bosnian cities. The new post-war reconstruction and recovery were slow, an uncertain political and economic reality its main obstacles. In the aftermath of the war, Sarajevo was the capital of an independent state and a local centre; nowadays, its political, economic, and diplomatic relations are invaluable for the creation of a post-socialist and post-war country.

In Sarajevo, a city inhabited by various religious groups – Muslims, Catholics, and Christian Orthodox worshippers, mainly – the post-socialist transition unfolded under the burdens of not only economic and geopolitical transmutations but also the recent war destruction and the ongoing recovery. As the new millennium began, the Bosnian society experienced fervent re-traditionalisation, ethnic discords, and vigorous insertions of religious leaders in everyday politics. After decades of socialist self-management, the new era brought upon a nascent capitalist economy, and political parties imbued with nationalist rhetoric. The influx of investments into Bosnian cities, the capital of Sarajevo in particular, was recurrently tied with corruption – at times blatantly displayed. It was also interlinked with the construct of Sarajevo's new architectural identity: that of investors' urbanism.

In 2008, in Sarajevo's neighbourhood of *Marijin Dvor* – named after the Austro-Hungarian Marienhof – the local government removed an old tobacco factory, irreparably destroyed during the war. The city government planned to erect a commercial centre on the site and envisioned an opera hall for a nearby open space. The Saudi Arabian investment company, the Al-Shiddi Group, acquired the land and soon started the construction of a commercial complex comprised of a shopping mall, a hotel, an underground parking garage, and an office tower. The investors professed “immense respect for this country and its capital”, arguably exhibited in the inclusion of the “word ‘Sarajevo’ in the center’s name.”<sup>6)</sup> However, the initially proposed project – once ratified by the city – never came to fruition, as the investor altered the designs after the city officials granted the permits, effectively erecting a structure that was never approved by the city's masterplan (FIPA 2012, p. 58). This process and its result – albeit on a smaller scale in Sarajevo – proved forewarning for the post-Yugoslav urban space, later seen on a larger scale in Zagreb and Belgrade.

<sup>6)</sup> Cf.: Official *Sarajevo City Center* website [https://www.scc.ba/en/about\\_us.html](https://www.scc.ba/en/about_us.html) (accessed April 4, 2020).

When its facades stood completed, *Sarajevo City Center* towered over the nearby five-story-high residential blocks dating back to the late nineteenth century, cutting off the air circulation in the city in a valley, with its digital façade bright to the point that residents of the nearby buildings are finding it impossible to live in their homes. The Al-Shiddi Group entrusted the design of the complex to a local architectural studio, Grupa.Arh, but the completed project shows little, if any, acknowledgement of the local architectural traditions and urban heritage. The *Center's* architecture displays characteristics of an imported architectural style and lacking organic urban development, a trend similar to a later urban development project in Belgrade. The urban and political processes that followed and facilitated the construction of *Sarajevo City Center* exemplify the Bosnian post-war and post-communist reality and exhibit early trends that later flourished in the region: a rise of investors' market where local urban processes are unregulated and/or relegated to a position far behind the interests of investors and politicians engaged in market manipulations.

The urban developments in the former Yugoslav capital of Belgrade further exemplify the regional socio-political transformations and illustrate the problematic of lacking political and economic transparency. Belgrade was the capital of the former Yugoslav federation for over forty years; it is a city of Ottoman urban remnants, Byzantine influences, secession palaces, and socialist modernism. The five decades of socialism saw a continuous influx of the federation-wide funds into the capital, and the city's central political and economic place in the federation assured its constant growth. In 1991, as socialist Yugoslavia ceased to exist, the Serbian dominance in the region ceded, and the country's leaders' decision to partake in warfare in neighbouring Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo resulted in years-long economic sanctions. The economy experienced an unforeseen and immense hit, and the country plummeted into extreme poverty.<sup>7)</sup>

As elsewhere in the region and the post-socialist world, the early years of the new millennium in Serbia saw an influx of foreign investments and an onset of urban transformations. In 2014, the Serbian government – spearheaded by the Serbian prime minister and later president, Aleksandar Vučić – and in collaboration with an Abu Dhabi based investment consortium Eagle Hills, unearthed the plan for the *Belgrade Waterfront* urban renewal project.<sup>8)</sup> The transformation of the Sava River shore and the massive construction of commercial and residential spaces was estimated to cost around 3.5 billion Euros. The investors envisioned the complex to house offices and apartment buildings, a hotel, park and a promenade, a mall and a tower. The project leaders argued that *Belgrade Waterfront* would be a “game-changing hub for Serbia”, and that it “takes into consideration the balanced sensitivity to nature, culture and modernity” (WRIGHT 2015).

The reaction was immediate: the citizens of Belgrade, supported by architects, planners, and artists, took to streets in May 2016, demanding the government not to “drown Belgrade” (WRIGHT 2015). Due to the events that took place prior to the beginning of the construction, the protesters promptly rejected the claims of national progress anticipated in the project: the pre-existing older structures were cleared from the site without any

<sup>7)</sup> The consequences of the international embargo were so severe that in 1993 over 39 percent of the Serbian population lived on less than 2 US dollars (JOVANOVIĆ and SUKOVIĆ 2001).

<sup>8)</sup> Cf. the official “Belgrade Waterfront” website <https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/> (accessed March 10, 2020).

input from heritage experts and the access to the river became heavily restricted. The government never engaged with the protestors. A question came to plague the public discourse of the project: who was it for and who benefits from it? In the country where unemployment is at over 10 percent (a record low was 25 percent in 2012), and where the average monthly salary barely exceeds 400 US dollars, it is doubtful that the majority of Serbians living in the capital will have any access to the massive complex; that is, outside of seeing it from the Riverwalk.

The government and the project supporters argue that its construction would bring over 20,000 new jobs and will significantly entice the economy. Some have even compared it to Tito's Yugoslav expansion of *New Belgrade*, a mastodon project of socialist urbanism and architecture. However, the leaders of the opposition straightforwardly made their case: while filing over 3,000 complaints against the proposed changes to the urban plan (PERIĆ 2020, p. 219), the protesters argued that the construction of *Belgrade Waterfront* complex is not for the sake of urban renewal, nor is it for the economic benefits of Serbians. Those opposing the construction have argued that *Belgrade Waterfront* is a capitalist venture that the very few will benefit from, the citizens of Belgrade not amongst them: the local officials promptly evicted the locals living on what was to become the construction site, and the construction commenced before acquiring all legal permits. Along with the loss of residences and small shops that stood where *Waterfront* emerged, the citizens of the Serbian capital will have lost more. Jovan Jelovac, founder of the Belgrade Design Week, puts it somewhat simplistically, yet poignantly: "Belgrade Waterfront is what Belgrade deserves after 20 years of corruption" (WRIGHT 2015).

In early 2019, the mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandić, signed a "memorandum of understanding" with Eagle Hills, the same Abu Dhabi based developer as in Belgrade, to build a 500-million-Euro "city within the city", *Zagreb Manhattan* (VLADISAVLJEVIC 2019). In Zagreb, the capital of the EU member state Croatia, the site of the modernist-built Fair, the city's Hippodrome, and a local football club stadium would be turned into residential and commercial structures, promenades, parks, shopping centres, and an inevitable skyscraper (ibid.). The architectural details of the plan are further unclear, but comparisons with *Belgrade Waterfront* arose promptly. Bandić's plan required for the City Assembly to alter the pre-existing urban plan, a feature that proved not to be an issue in Belgrade due to the links between the city's Urban Planning Institute and the political regime (PERIĆ 2020, p. 218).

Fifteen thousand inhabitants of the Siget neighbourhood where the Fair is located signed an appeal against the project. Along with the complaints against the demolishing of the semi-protected modernist structure of the Fair and the unregulated investors' input into the urban developments in Zagreb, the protesters drew attention to the diminishing green spaces in the city that would be further eradicated if *Manhattan* was to go forward. Just like in Belgrade only a few years prior, the protesters – joined under the moniker of "Right to the City" – took to streets and vehemently expressed their outrage with the project and Bandić's continued manipulations with Zagreb's urban plans. The promises of national economic gain that was to come from Middle Eastern millions were met with disapproval, the leadership of the "Right to the City" rejecting the project with the claim that it meant "surrendering public resources to ultimately make a private investor profitable" (VLADISAVLJEVIC 2020).

Outside of the corruption accusations attached to Bandić – not for the first time in his six terms as the mayor of the Croatian capital (RFE/RL's Balkan Service 2018) – and several protests against the project, little is known about the further particulars of *Zagreb Manhattan*. The construction is to cover over 1.1 million square metres near the Sava River shore, yet the details of the architecture are unknown. The architect and guest lecturer at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Architecture Marina Pavković argues that the details of Bandić's project are “non-transparent, hidden, and unclear” (KLANCIR 2019). She draws links with *Belgrade Waterfront* and the Eagle Hills' approach to the Serbian capital and its transformation and recalls *Forbes* naming Belgrade “Abu Dhabi's bad joke” (SHEPARD 2016): for the company, profit remains a primary interest. Finally, the architect warns that Bandić's project may still go forward. Regardless of the outpour of protests, the mayor remains politically powerful; the promises of wealth that Eagle Hills is presumably to inject into Zagreb serve as a good incentive for the local government.

In July 2019, the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA) from Zurich sent an open letter to the City Assembly of Zagreb on behalf of its international scholars and experts. The signatories of the document warned against “following the example of cities which have privatised and subsequently destroyed their waterfronts through re-development projects” (INURA 2019). INURA members argue that handing over the land to international investors “tends to generate development of buildings which extract value out of the city, not contributing to the city's needs” (ibid.). The letter signatories further caution that investors have minimal commitment to the public interest. While recalling the case of Belgrade and the *Waterfront*, they warned that a project similar to *Manhattan* did not bring economic development only several hundred kilometres east as promised, but that it has been “detrimental to the health and living standards of people living in the city” (ibid.).

In February 2020, the City Assembly of Zagreb rejected the changes to the urban plan (VLADISAVLJEVIC 2020), and the *Zagreb Manhattan* project was put on hold. However, it is doubtful this would be the last step of the *Manhattan* in Zagreb: Milan Bandić's agreement with Eagle Hills from 2019 is legally binding and opens an opportunity for the Middle Eastern consortium to file a suit against the city of Zagreb “for compensation for all costs Eagle Hills have incurred in preparing the project” (ibid.). If this were to be the case, the dire neoliberal processes would put the City Assembly of Zagreb in a position to have to pay for the preparation of the project that the majority of its citizens never wanted and that experts found unfeasible, and jeopardise other development the city desperately needs (KLANCIR 2019).

## 5 The financialised post-socialist city

The analyses of the urban developments in the three capital cities of Yugoslav successor states allow for a better understanding of political and architectural processes that have taken place in the post-socialist Western Balkans. Further, this study shows that THEURILLAT's concept of financialised city tentatively applies to the post-Yugoslav capitals. The local and national leaders' heavy-handed dealing with urban space and architectural

projects, an almost exclusive focus on investors' demands, and the neglect of citizens' needs and architecture and urban professionals' recommendations, stands as a characteristic of the post-socialist urban developments and the deeply entwined nature of politics and architecture in the former Yugoslav territory. While mimicking the similar trends in East-Central Europe, the neoliberal economy enacted by the post-Yugoslav leaders is even direr in its consequences for the local populations: a decade of warfare and its disastrous economic aftermath have caused poverty and corruption at unprecedented levels, and real estate and land machinations have proven most profitable.<sup>9)</sup>

The distinctions between Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade are quite a few; however, they are minimal and only further support the notion of the post-Yugoslav post-socialist space. The urban development projects have been approved or agreed upon covertly, urban and architectural professionals had seldom partaken in the deliberations, and local authorities granted the foreign investors unprecedented freedoms concerning the architectural design of structures and treatment of urban spaces. The three examples show the three stages of the influx of foreign – Middle Eastern – investments in the post-Yugoslav countries: *Sarajevo City Center*, although comprised of a shopping mall and a hotel, is one structure located on the spot of a former factory destroyed during the war that local authorities never planned to reconstruct; in the cases of Belgrade and Zagreb, we see entire urban areas redesigned, and in the case of *Belgrade Waterfront*, subsequently removed from the open urban narrative of the city and excluded from everyday use of its citizens.

In the examples analysed above, the entwined political, financial, and architectural processes are rendered seemingly unavoidable: in Sarajevo, the citizens were excluded from the decision-making process – as were all professional bodies – and in Belgrade and Zagreb, local protests have proved either futile, or their successes are not seen as permanent. Amongst the concerns identified by the public and local architects and planners, was not only the illegality of land use and plans adjustments but also the issue of the architectural design of the development projects. In Sarajevo, upon acquiring permits for construction, the investors and architect further altered the project, only barely following the masterplan for the city centre of the Bosnian capital (FIPA 2012, p. 58). *Belgrade Waterfront* was funded partly by the Serbian government of Aleksandar Vučić – the Serbian president accused of political malversations in the land appropriation for the project (PERIĆ 2020, p. 221) – and the Abu Dhabi-based Eagle Hills investment and development company. The American architects Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed the complex. Yet, Serbian architects warn that permissions for construction were acquired based on a model delivered from Malaysia, seemingly composed of different recycled models (KLANCIR 2019). In Zagreb, Milan Bandić and Eagle Hills have not reached the stage of the design proposal, but the mayor's claims that "heavyweights" like Norman Foster would rush to compete to build Zagreb were met with scorn (ibid.).

In Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sarajevo, the investors and their architects failed to meet the cities' needs or urban plan regulations – such as heritage preservation, maintenance of the cities' diminishing parks, or renewal of faulty infrastructure. In all three cases, local

<sup>9)</sup> For a detailed account on poverty and corruption in Yugoslav successor states, see RAMET et al. (eds.) (2017): *Building Democracy in the Yugoslav Successor States: Accomplishments, Setbacks, and Challenges since 1990*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

authorities modified the urban plans to meet the needs of investors' and the expected financial outcomes.<sup>10</sup> The cities' democratic processes were removed by legally mandated governing parties, and public participation in decision making and debates became virtually non-existent regardless of city-wide protests that took place in Zagreb and Belgrade.<sup>11</sup> THEURILLAT's concept of a financialised city— characterised by a weak and inherently decontextualised anchoring of capital where buildings are exclusively seen as such by investors – is evident in the three examples of post-Yugoslav and post-socialist cities: the three cases, in particular Belgrade and Zagreb due to the larger scale of urban projects, serve exclusively to facilitate a positive financial outcome, rarely taking into account factors such as cities' urban development plans, or the architecture's users (TUFEK-MEMIŠEVIĆ 2014, p. 82).

An early example of a large urban investment in the former Yugoslav successor states, the *Sarajevo City Center* shows the main elements of THEURILLAT's financialised city: an influx of foreign funds with minimal attention to the site's socio-cultural fabric and an exclusive focus on commercial activities – a shopping mall, offices, a hotel. The 2008 project in Sarajevo exhibits “weak and decontextualized anchoring” of capital by foreign investors aided by local actors; however, the abandonment of structures and development THEURILLAT et al. (2016) associate with the typical financialised city is missing from Sarajevo. The financialised city, in this case, is evident in the initial approach to the investment project and its decontextualised nature with the socio-cultural and urban fabric of Sarajevo, as well as the investors' exclusive focus on capital reproduction and accumulation. Yet, the *City Center* in Sarajevo is commercially a successful feature, at least partly as its hotel segment stands empty due to a long construction time and the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

In the cases of Belgrade and Zagreb, we see a further expansion of the concept of a financialised city, in particular in regard to the main actors and their networks. Both projects show deep links between the political actors – the president in the case of Belgrade and the city's mayor in Zagreb – and we see the further decontextualisation of each of the urban development projects. The urban developments in Belgrade and Zagreb exhibit an apparent disregard to citizens' rejection of the project. The complete refusal to engage with those protesting against the development and the removal of the inhabitants of the Savamala neighbourhood in Belgrade shows the overwhelming municipal and governmental disregard for the local population. Similar is the case with Milan Bandić's manipulations with Zagreb's urban plans and possible further legal proceedings, regardless of the City's rejection of the project. Comparably to Sarajevo, the full extent of the financialised city will not take place and would not have taken place in Belgrade and Zagreb – the creation of a ghost town and completely unoccupied structures with prompt extraction of capital is not to unfold in the former Yugoslavia (THEURILLAT et al. 2016, p. 1513). Albeit, the disconcerting nature of the links between the municipal and government's actors and foreign

<sup>10</sup> I would like to extend my thanks to Hend Aly for information on *Belgrade Waterfront* and the processes behind it. For more information, see her highly detailed master's thesis: ALY (2019): *Bringing the Political to the City: Politicising vs. Depoliticising Urban Transformation in Belgrade and Tirana*.

<sup>11</sup> Public hearings did take place in Belgrade in regard to the *Waterfront*, yet all of the comments were promptly rejected. No public debate took place in Sarajevo.

financiers remains highly problematic and illustrative of the post-socialist financialised cities in the Balkans.

## 6 The global and the national

When interviewed about her feelings concerning the *Belgrade Waterfront*, a Serbian physician made an off-hand remark that “Belgrade is now a proper Western city”; in Sarajevo, many continue to praise the arrival of global brands to *Sarajevo City Center* mall that were previously inaccessible to the citizens of the Bosnian capital.<sup>12)</sup> The rhetoric of “being Western”, and “finally” being a part of the “normal” and “European” space – no longer existing on the communist-produced periphery – has been the main argument of the proponents of these development projects: the investors and local governments have continuously labelled them as such.

Those in charge of the redevelopment endeavours have not only claimed that the economic benefits would indeed stem from these projects, but they also emphasised the globalising rhetoric in which these urban developments would assure the states’ unjustly denied place in Western European political and economic arena.<sup>13)</sup> Still, the discourses surrounding the construction projects in Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb remain inherently nationalist as well as globalising. While propagating the national benefits of these projects, their political supporters and investors employ the rhetoric of an expanding national image on the global arena and emphasise the internal political and financial strengths of any country that could manage such an architectural and urban feat. The fragile nation-building projects that have taken place since the end of Yugoslavia have severely impacted the negotiations of urban space and its users, and political and financial malversations have transformed the cities in the region’s urban battlefields.

Completed a decade earlier and of a smaller scale than its later counterparts in Belgrade and Zagreb, *Sarajevo City Center* served as an early indication that relinquishing urban autonomy to investors will be a permanent characteristic of large post-socialist urban developments in the region, all under a pretence of a globalising and “Westernising” discourse. The Bosnian politics and economy – high unemployment and poverty juxtaposed with widespread corruption – allowed for a muddled influx of funds under the excuse of job production, financial injection, and overall progress and collaboration. During the early stages of the construction, the investors argued that they were to employ local companies and local workers, yet the level of autonomy those had remained low (FIPA 2012, p. 58). However, the influx of Saudi Arabian investments has been even more so lauded in another manner: the fervent re-traditionalisation of the Bosnian society and rising Islamisation welcomed the presence of Middle Eastern investors, additionally problematising the discourse of “Westernisation” and progress in the country.

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<sup>12)</sup> The interviews with citizens of Sarajevo and Belgrade have been conducted in the period between May 2018 and April 2019.

<sup>13)</sup> For further reading on the “claimant” rhetoric in the former socialist states, see DOMAŃSKI (2004): West and East in ‘New Europe’: The Pitfalls of Paternalism and a Claimant Attitude.

The design of the *Belgrade Waterfront* has been primarily considered problematic due to the manner it was presented to the public, without any debate. Prepared by the American architectural office Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, the preliminary proposal necessary for its interpolation into the city's urban plan was created without any consultation with planning organisations in Belgrade; therefore, this rendered the plan "in its nature totally different from the rest of the official Master Plan of Belgrade 2021 [...] it was added *ex-post* into it in the form of the amendments" (PERIĆ 2020, p. 218). Those opposing the project raised additional concerns regarding the uprooting and relocation of the inhabitants of the site, the closing-off of a large part of the waterfront, the removal of Belgrade's historic central railway station, and the overall muddled allocation of funds by the Serbian government under the pretence of national and economic growth (DRAGOLJO 2020). The government's role in the project development and its discourse of progress and "Westernisation" proved problematic at the onset of the construction: the removal of citizens from the Savamala neighbourhood that was slated for demolition to clear the site for the *Waterfront* was instigated by an "unexplained incident in which dozens of masked men demolished buildings" (DRAGOJLO 2016). The demolition took place on the night of the 2016 general elections, further instigating animosity toward the ruling party.

Savamala, a neglected industrial site near Belgrade's central railway station, has served as a gathering point of artists and designers since the early 2000s and the ouster of Slobodan Milošević. A signifier of the progressive socio-political change in the Serbian capital, Savamala and its cultural activities promised a new future for the city expelled from the European cultural movements during the 1990s and tainted by a decade of governmental support of warfare in the region (cf. COLDWELL 2015). The destruction of a reformist cultural space, the obscured government's machinations surrounding *Belgrade Waterfront* and its architectural design and urban plans, and the conspicuous lack of public debate only exacerbated the frustrations of a large percentage of the citizens of Belgrade. Ultimately, they emphasised the problematic financial and political relations effectively running the urban politics of the region's capitals, under the pretence of a progressive globalising narrative.

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the political elites in Zagreb focused both economically and culturally toward political centres in Central and Western Europe. In Zagreb, the westernmost of the three cities, the discourse of rejection of the Yugoslav past and its adamant urban and political "Westernisation" has been illustrated in the city's commercial developments: "New business zones, high-rise office blocks and shopping malls" flourished throughout the city (SVIRČIĆ GOTOVAC and ZLATAR 2015, p. 37). These structures intrude "in the urban context", their building standards low, "in compliance with developers' requests" (ibid., pp. 37–38). Under the guise of economic growth and progress, the elimination of open public space followed this trend, along with the severe ruin of modernist urban heritage, vehemently opposed by citizens and urban professionals. Thus, it is intriguing that *Zagreb Manhattan*, a project furthered through the discourse of urban and economic progress and "Westernisation" of the Croatian capital is funded with Middle Eastern investments. While Milan Bandić's plan is currently – many worry, only temporarily – suspended, its ultimate execution or rejection may be the final battle in what is seen as the Croatian democratic society: Bandić's ability to push forward or the

City's refusal of *Manhattan* will either show the presence of autocracy in Zagreb or its fall (BAKOTIN 2019).

The juxtaposition between the three distinct yet inherently similar cases of architectural projects and urban developments shines a light on the problematic of the contemporary post-socialist politics in the post-Yugoslav region. The newly democratic states in the Western Balkans, impoverished from the decades of conflict and transition pains, emphasise the economic shift that both resulted in and was facilitated by the transformations of their cities' built environment. Funding acquired from foreign investors in Belgrade, Sarajevo, and Zagreb relegates the architectural processes to a secondary position. It renders its participants – architects, politicians, and citizens – as either compliant actors in the execution of projects or elements of nuisance effectively disregarded. These urban developments in Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb are a sign of a broader and ostensibly permanent post-socialist and post-Yugoslav trend: the new nations' capital cities are transformed by an influx of foreign funding aided by the local and national governments' manoeuvrings, and the cities' leaders' neglect of local architectural traditions and heritage, but hampered by the citizens' rejections of such projects.

## 7 Conclusion

The notion of a post-socialist city stands inextricably tied with the post-socialist financial and economic problematic. This period in the Western Balkans, in the Yugoslav successor states, has not only been beleaguered by the problems of the transition era but also by the vast urban and economic devastation of what was effectively a decade of war. The post-Yugoslav states did not inherit promising economies – both due to the 1990s wars, the 1980s inflation, and the 1989 hyperinflation – and the high level of corruption and urban malversations have defined the post-socialist urban and political spaces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. The lack of public debate has been prevalent in the ten-year-period since the erstwhile construction of *Sarajevo City Center*. The government leaders and investors involved in the process of transformation of the capital cities in the Western Balkans have encountered vehement protests, and architectural historians, public figures, and cities' inhabitants have continuously called for the processes surrounding these developments to be open for public debate and to be transparent. The critics were rarely met with a response, and the urban transformations forged ahead.

The large urban development projects in Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade illustrate the predicaments of the newly democratic societies in the post-Yugoslav territories. These urban renewal endeavours – some distinct and at different scales yet all characterised by behind-the-curtain governmental manoeuvres – display the dual problematic of the post-socialist states and their urban spaces. On the one hand, the financial issues and nationalist problematic of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been exacerbated by an influx of foreign investments; on the other, the urban spaces in the Western Balkans have been transformed into battlegrounds for globalising and “Westernising” narratives, revealing corruption and land malversations. In the once peripheries of the Cold War East and West, now in the new economic and political peripheries of the European Union, the urban

projects in Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb arguably function as tools of national elevation and financial gain without any added urban value. The post-Yugoslav and post-socialist space is inundated by the broken election promises of a “European” future; local urban plans are modified to momentary needs of those eager to invest in the region and facilitate this pursuit of “Europe”, be it the local governments, international consortiums, or both. The agency of those partaking in the process is hindered, and the dreaded concept of investors’ urbanism threatens to permeate the region even further. Still, the thwarted *Zagreb Manhattan* indicates a different possibility: the local government in the Croatian capital rejected the development proposal once and again. Will the next election change this?

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