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Who Plans What for Whom Under the “Iron Law” of Megaprojects? The Discourse Analysis of the Belgrade Waterfront Project

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ABSTRACT

Urban megaprojects exhibit various distortions: special regulations, budget overrun, additional funding sources, long-term timeframes, and ad-hoc actor networks. Coping with such challenges seems to be demanding even for the welfare states and advanced democracies built upon the governmental control of megaproject development. Therefore, it is interesting to observe the nature of urban governance of megaproject development in a transitional society facing immature institutional and regulatory frameworks. Against such background, this article examines the main forces behind the flagship project of contemporary Serbia—the Belgrade Waterfront megaproject. By collecting 38 articles from the daily press, the paper identifies relevant stakeholders and present their statements to depict their positions, interests, and specific value frameworks. Using the discourse analysis to interpret the statements, the paper offers the following results: *first*, recognition of conflicts and coalitions; *second*, elucidation of the decision-making flows, and *third*, identification

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of power structures in the mentioned project. In addition, valuable insights into the problematic contextual features, e.g., tycoon-initiated urban development, the politics-led planning process, and weak civil engagement mechanisms, are elucidated. Concluding lessons on how to curb the extra-nature of urban megaprojects appear relevant for similar socio-spatial settings.

KEYWORDS

Belgrade, Belgrade Waterfront, discourse analysis, Serbia, transitional societies, urban megaprojects

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Introduction

Observed through the lens of the physical structure and the built environment as an outcome of a planning process, megaprojects are not a new issue on the historical route of city development. Almost all the countries, and particularly those in Europe, faced the need for a massive urban redevelopment after World War II. However, a distinctive point should be noted here for understanding the specificities of the contemporary megaproject developments around the globe. Namely, up to the mid-1970s, all the massive urban developments were coordinated by the state—the state was the main funding source, coordinator of the developmental activities, and executor of the final implementation steps (Diaz Orueta & Fainstein, 2008). With the decline of public support in such projects and a substantial need for private finances, the public-private partnerships flourished as an adequate mechanism for managing large urban regeneration projects in the 1990s. The shift from a traditional industry towards a more creative one directly affected the vast parts of urban land, usually in the central city areas. The role of the state changed, too: first to the managerial, and afterwards to the entrepreneurial mode (Fainstein, 2001; Brenner, 2004, 2019).

Contemporary megaproject development frequently happens on abandoned industrial sites or deprived urban areas—brownfields—usually situated within the inner-city centre, well-connected to the transport nodes, equipped with diverse infrastructural networks, and close to the built urban patterns. However, new development demands the change of the previous land use and a significant improvement or new construction of both infrastructural grids and the building stock. Against such a background, urban megaprojects are a point of interest to various stakeholders: developers chasing for profit through revitalising the site, citizens tending to protect their local urban identity, and planners and public officials stretched between the ethical norms to protect the public interest and pressure imposed by financially powerful actors. Flyvbjerg (2017) further illustratively defines

the “iron-law” as an operating mode of megaproject development. Accordingly, the “iron-law” of megaprojects relies upon the logic of exception and includes extra budget, special regulations, non-standard organisational structure, questioning of public accountability, and the central role of developers at the expense of the city leaders, planners, and citizens. In recognising the potential negative externalities invoked by megaprojects, some authors claim the role of the public sector, the extent of governmental control and commitment to the social equity as a remedy towards an exceptional nature of megaproject development (Fainstein, 2001, 2008).

The management mode of megaprojects—based on strong developers, quite frequently including the international financial powerholders (Flyvbjerg, 2014), seems to be similar regardless of the context—developed Global North or developing Global South (del Cerro Santamaria, 2013; Lee, 2012; Flyvbjerg, 2009). However, particular attention should be devoted to differentiating the role of the public sector in developed and developing societies. Regarding the first, the success of the public intervention in the megaproject development depends on the specific social model the megaproject is embedded in (Fainstein, 2008; Perić & Hoch, 2017). For example, in liberal democracies with a strong capitalist outlook (e.g., United States), the extent of government support would be marginalised. On the other hand, weakened, but still persevering welfare democracies (e.g., Scandinavia) would provide much more room for public deliberation and negotiation of the initially posed interests by the private sector. Interestingly, in both cases, the local authorities (e.g., city mayor) play a crucial role as they want to leave a mark on their cities (Fainstein, 2008). However, what is happening in the transitional societies (e.g., post-socialist European countries) stretched between the need to catch up with the global competitiveness and the immature institutional and regulatory frameworks incapable of protecting the public interest amidst the run for developer’s attraction? The governmental efficacy in pursuing its control mechanisms lacks in the societies faced with political, institutional and market transition (Cook, 2010; Keresztély & Scott, 2012; Perić & Maruna, 2012; Cope, 2015; Djurasović, 2016; Zdunić, 2017; Perić & D’hondt, 2020). But is the state and the city a weak side-lined party dominated by the developers’ commitment to private benefits?

Transitional societies face a paradox: though the public sector is not a key player in the megaproject game according to the previously described role of providing governmental control, it is not marginalised. The politics embedded into the highest governmental tiers becomes the key partner and enabler of the developers’ visions. This is known as authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff, 2014, 2016; Di Giovanni, 2016) In contrast to the previously mentioned strong local administrative scale as a prerequisite for successful megaproject development, transitional countries are dominated by the so-called “top-top” approach, i.e., a regulationist state-led process of urban development (Zeković & Maričić, 2022).

Lined up with the previous approach, Serbia offers a typical example of the nation-state politics playing a significant role in pursuing megaproject development (Zeković et al., 2018; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018; Machala & Koelemaj, 2019; Perić, 2020b; Piletić, 2022). State-led management of urban development appears

due to a specific nature of the Serbian government, which can be described as “hybrid”, i.e., between democracy and autocracy (Nations in Transit 2020. Serbia, 2020)¹, or as Vujošević (2010) puts it: a “proto-democracy”. Under such circumstances, urban megaprojects are seen as a tool of the ruling political regime in strengthening its power and influence no matter the side effects on the entire society. Consequently, high-level politicians’ nationalist narrative dominates the advertising of urban megaprojects seen as a source of income and new jobs for the residents, strengthening the national economy, boosting the overall prosperity, and positioning a city on the map of the world cities (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018). Nevertheless, the reality is different—populist language usually serves only to hide corruption and political patronage under a veil of authoritarian entrepreneurialism (Perić, 2020b; Perić & D’hondt, 2020; Zeković & Maričić, 2022).

In the next sections, we illuminate such narrative used in the megaproject development of the Belgrade Waterfront (BW) project. More specifically, we look at the planning phase of the BW project—from the project inception during the political campaign in 2012 till the start of the construction in 2015. Observing the front-end phase is crucial, as we intend to reveal the narrative that triggers the exclusive position of megaprojects as a tool for urban development, and to illuminate different communication styles that settle the ground for megaproject development in the country facing transformation towards the liberal economy and political pluralism.

The paper is structured as follows. After a brief overview of the specificities of urban megaproject development in different societies with a particular emphasis on the transitional countries, we present the methodological apparatus used in the research revolving around the discourse analysis as a relevant tool to discover not only given but also hidden factors shaping the story behind the BW project. The central part firstly presents the statements of the relevant stakeholders (units of analysis) to be then critically interpreted. The concluding remarks draw explicitly on the parameters that not only elucidate the narrative but also explain a larger social and institutional setting: actors’ coalitions and conflicts, decision-making flows, and power structures. Recommendations on how to increase the level of governmental support and, thus, strengthen the commitment to social equity are briefly provided in the end.

Methodological Approach

The selected case for the analysis—Belgrade Waterfront, is referred to as the best practice example of urban development according to the political structures in power since 2012. To elucidate the narrative behind this project, i.e., to reveal major driving forces that have shaped its process and outcomes—all ingrained in different

¹ According to the Freedom House’s Nations in Transit 2020. Serbia (2020) Report on the fluctuation of the democracy level among the Central European and the Western Balkans states over ten years (2010–2020), in the period between 2010 and 2018, Serbia was considered a semi-consolidated democracy, while in 2019 and 2020 Serbia held the status of a “competitive authoritarian” or “hybrid” (between democracy and autocracy) regime.

stakeholders' positions, interests, and value frameworks as the main variables—newspaper articles were chosen as the source of information. More precisely, these were 38 selected articles published in three renowned daily papers—*Politika*, *Blic*, and *Danas*, between 2012 and 2015. These papers provide objective information based on research journalism, analyse the relevant topics from different angles (urban planning, economy, social justice), and treat equally all the relevant stakeholders to comprehensively show various viewpoints on the topic. For brevity, the following sections provide and analyse 17 key stakeholders' statements as the units of analysis.

A discourse analysis was used to analyse the statements to get an insight into the way the stakeholders speak about the megaprojects, what they highlight as their advantages, and how they perceive its shortcomings. From the perspective of discourse analysis, political conflict is not a simple consequence of a conflict of interest but involves different meanings that people incorporate into the problem. Therefore, if urban development stems from the decision-making process, the methodology to understand planning changes should not be normative, but descriptive, explanatory, interpretative, and hermeneutical (Getimis, 2012). How actions are represented in the language is, thus, of crucial interest (Jacobs, 2006). The discourse analysis does not start from a fixed theoretical and methodological stance; it is the process during which the topic is further refined to construct the object of research (Fairclough, 2003). According to Hajer (2006), the discourse analysis “opens up methodologically sound ways to combine the analysis of the discursive production of meaning with the analysis of the socio-political practices from which social constructs emerge, and in which the actors that make these statements engage” (p. 67).

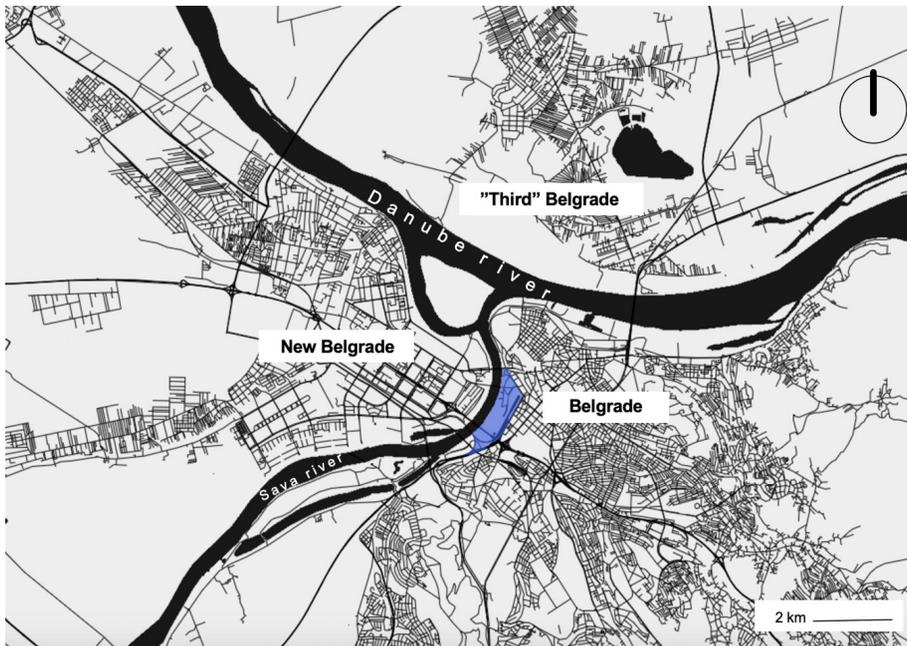
In brief, the methodological assumption of the discourse analysis is that different stakeholders tend to establish a specific narrative or the version of an event to pursue their own goals (Jacobs, 2006; Fairclough et al., 2004). Hence, this analysis not only helps to understand what the main tone of the general narrative is but also identify what has been not said in the announcements and what that further reveals about the projects. In other words, the discourse analysis elucidates the ideological, political, and economic contexts that shape powerful stakeholders aimed at creating a hegemony of their interests (Lees, 2004).

In practical terms, the steps of discursive analysis start from data collection and description, followed by interpretation and, finally, the analysis ends with an explanation. As the key milestone in the entire process of the BW urban development was the adoption of the amended Belgrade Master Plan in 2014 (The Amendments, 2014), the analytical units were collected two years before and one year after the plan adoption to depict the most intense narrative on the BW pros and cons. Provided original statements are analysed by the coding technique with the stated preferences further grouped according to their mutual similarities. Such data interpretation aims at identifying the dominant discourses, i.e., various viewpoints of stakeholders and their interests based on the specific value system. More precisely, discourse analysis elucidates the stakeholders' conflicts and coalitions, decision-making flows, and power structures.

The Discourse of Urban Megaproject Development: The Case of Belgrade Waterfront

The BW project has been the paradigmatic example of contemporary Belgrade urban development. Since the beginning of the new millennium, the 90-ha area on the right bank of the River Sava has been continuously deteriorating to, finally, transform into a huge brownfield area occupied mainly by an obsolete shunting yard as part of the Belgrade main railway station and some dilapidated housing (Figure 1). Embedded in the central city core, the area has been always attracting the greatest attention, not only of national but also of international parties. BW was announced as the priority project during the 2012 political campaign of the then largest opposition party—the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), which after winning the elections fulfilled its promise. The preliminary design project by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (Figures 2, 3) served as a base for the final project design by the local planning and architectural offices, and amendments to the Belgrade Master Plan in 2014 (The Amendments, 2014). The construction of a grand political project financed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) investor, Eagle Hills (represented by sheikh Mohamed Alabbar), with considerable subsidies by the Serbian government, commenced in September 2015.

Figure 1
The Position of the Belgrade Waterfront Project within the Belgrade City Pattern



Note. Source: Authors.

Figure 2

The Model of the Belgrade Waterfront Project



Note. Source: <https://www.belgradewaterfront.com>; copyright: Eagle Hills.

Figure 3

The Rendering of the Belgrade Waterfront Project



Note. Source: <https://www.belgradewaterfront.com>; copyright: Eagle Hills.

Overview of the Units of Analysis

In total, 17 statements as the analytical units are collected for the period between 2012 and 2015, as given in Table 1 below. The table indicates the name of the daily press, the date and the title of the article, the stakeholder providing the statement, and the statement itself. The key wording within the statement relevant for the data analysis (i.e., the part of the statement depicting specific position, interest, and value framework) has been additionally underlined.

Table 1
Overview of the Stakeholders' Statements

Daily press, date The news article title	Stakeholder in the Belgrade Waterfront project Stakeholder's statement
<i>Politika</i> , 20.04.2012 Rudolf Giuliani in Belgrade at the invitation of the Progressives	Candidate for Mayor of Belgrade, A. Vučić "I think that this is one of the <u>absolutely greatest projects</u> that Belgrade and Serbia can have. [...] We have secured investors, I <u>tell you, of course, there will be tenders for everything</u> " (<i>Politika</i> , 2012; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 01.08.2013 Djilas: 'Belgrade Waterfront' and the metro will change the image of the city	Mayor of Belgrade, D. Djilas "I believe that with the <u>cooperation of the republic government and city authorities</u> on the subway project and this project, <u>we can do what is really good for all Belgraders</u> " (<i>Blic</i> , 2013; our translation—authors).
<i>Politika</i> , 24.12.2013 Emirates finances Belgrade Waterfront shopping center	Coordinator of the BW project/the SPP board member, A. Karlovčan "We will try to get money from the UEA not only for the construction of facilities in the Sava amphitheater, whose value is estimated at around 3.1 billion dollars, but also for clearing that location. [...] <u>The competition will not be announced. [...] Planning documentation will be flexible</u> " (<i>Politika</i> , 2013; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 09.01.2014 Vučić: Alabbar invests \$ 3.1 billion in Belgrade Waterfront	First Deputy Prime Minister, A. Vučić "His [Alabbar's] conceptual plan is to clean everything up from there, and <u>to make it the only task for Serbia</u> " (<i>Blic</i> , 2014a; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 19.01.2014 Stefanović: Belgrade Waterfront is the future for the city and the people of Belgrade	Speaker of Serbian Parliament/Vice President of the SPP, N. Stefanović "We have shown that we know how to think strategically and that we know how to attract investors who will bring money, and <u>not just expect something to drip from the budget and someone to give you something</u> " (<i>Blic</i> , 2014b; our translation—authors).
<i>Danas</i> , 20.01.2014 Announce a competition for the project Belgrade Waterfront	First Deputy Prime Minister, A. Vučić "I know that <u>nothing is good enough for us Serbs</u> . Whatever we do, <u>there will always be someone who will find something wrong with it, even if it was the most beautiful project for our country ever</u> " (<i>Danas</i> , 2014a; our translation—authors).
<i>Danas</i> , 20.01.2014 Announce a competition for the project Belgrade Waterfront	President of the Association of Architects of Serbia, I. Marić "Why such a rush as if they were races? I guess in this troubled Serbia of ours, when such plans are in question, <u>a wide circle of citizens, architects, engineers, economists should be asked</u> " (<i>Danas</i> , 2014; our translation—authors).

Table 1 Continued

<i>Daily press, date</i> The news article title	Stakeholder in the Belgrade Waterfront project Stakeholder's statement
<i>Blic</i> , 20.01.2014 Vučić on "Belgrade Waterfront": Work will be completed	First Deputy Prime Minister, A. Vučić "We will respect the legal procedures and we will bring everything in accordance with the law, but <u>other people's money must be respected</u> . [...] If you think we're going to Europe and making fun of other people's money, <u>that our minds are much more important than someone's three billion dollars, I have to ask you where you think we live</u> " (Blic, 2014c; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 20.01.2014 Transparency Serbia: Is competition excluded for Belgrade Waterfront?	NGO Transparency Serbia "Will such an offer be accepted in the future when a potential investor presents a project that envisages the formation of a joint venture, in which the state or city offers land, and the investor money, or will we act selectively towards investors? [...] <u>What is the legal basis for forming a joint venture—is it a public-private partnership project, has the PPP Commission voted on it, as provided by the Law from 2011?</u> " (Blic, 2014d; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 01.03.2014 Presentation in Dubai, premiere of Belgrade Waterfront in Cannes	Economic Advisor to the First Deputy Prime Minister, S. Mali "Tomorrow is the most important day in the development of Belgrade Waterfront so far. This is the key day, because after that <u>we can start preparing urbanism and all other planning documents in order to realise that project</u> . [...] The final presentation of the master plan of the entire project will be led by <u>Mohamed Alabbar, who is the author of the project</u> " (Blic, 2014e; our translation—authors).
<i>Blic</i> , 27.06.2014 Model discovered: This is "Belgrade Waterfront"	Prime Minister, A. Vučić "Our plan is to change this part of the city and the <u>face of Serbia, which should look as beautiful and clean as this building</u> " (Blic, 2014f).
<i>Politika</i> , 05.10.2014 "Belgrade Waterfront" will not be a jungle of skyscrapers	Director of the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, N. Stefanović "The competition was absent because <u>politicians and the investor agreed</u> . This is a <u>project of national importance</u> " (Politika, 2014a; our translation—authors).
<i>Politika</i> , 06.11.2014 SANU presented 22 pages of remarks on "Belgrade Waterfront"	SANU (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), Architecture and Urban Planning Committee "If the draft spatial plan is not changed, 'Belgrade Waterfront' will remain an <u>isolated island in the center of the capital</u> , difficult to access and barely passable, which will cause traffic problems in other parts of the city as well" (Politika, 2014b; our translation—authors).
<i>Danas</i> , 15.11.2014 With swim rings and a song against "Belgrade Waterfront"	Activists "Don't let Belgrade d(r)own" "We will not allow public finances to be spent on private projects that only bring spatial segregation and traffic collapse to the city. [...] <u>The development, functioning of the city and its identity cannot be a product of investor desires, but exclusively of the needs of the society itself</u> " (Danas, 2014b; our translation—authors).

Table 1 Continued

<i>Daily press, date</i> The news article title	Stakeholder in the Belgrade Waterfront project Stakeholder’s statement
<i>Blic</i> , 06.03.2015 Architects: Urgently suspend the Belgrade Waterfront project	Academy of Architecture of Serbia “The project itself and the manner of its implementation abound in a number of legal violations, all in the interest of a supposedly profitable economic idea, in cooperation with a private investor. [...] The Spatial Plan for the Area for Specific Use that was adopted, actually <u>legalises the largest illegal construction in the world. The plan was the subject of a fake, farcical public inspection</u> ” (<i>Blic</i> , 2015; our translation—authors).
<i>Danas</i> , 10.03.2015 Mali: Everything we do is transparent	President of the Academy of Architecture of Serbia, M. Mitrović “Everything new is met with such a reaction from the public. A huge and fantastic issue is that the space of the Sava amphitheater has been cleared. <u>We know that all major projects are being built gradually</u> , so the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona has been built for 200 years” (<i>Danas</i> , 2015a; our translation—authors)..
<i>Danas</i> , 29.03.2015 Lawyers: “Belgrade Waterfront” project is unconstitutional	Group of 15 Belgrade lawyers “Whether it is legal and legitimate to sign an agreement with a <u>foreign partner, and then change the legal regulations and adopt a special law that enables a non-transparent agreement, is a question for everyone who participates in the process of adopting this special law.</u> [...] If the investor himself is not ready to solve property-legal relations by buying buildings and land from the current owners, why would it be done from the funds of all citizens, given to the budget of the Republic of Serbia?” (<i>Danas</i> , 2015b; our translation—authors).

Note. Source: Authors.

Discourse Analysis of the Belgrade Waterfront Project

The first idea on the Belgrade Waterfront project was coined in spring 2012 by Aleksandar Vučić, the then vice-president of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP)—the largest opposition party in the political campaign for election bids at all levels (presidential, parliamentary, and local). The use of superlatives in describing the project was expected from Vučić running for the position of the mayor of Belgrade. Additionally, his statements discover two distinctiveness: firstly, he uses direct language in addressing the general public (“I tell you”), and secondly, he highlights the need for transparency when referring to the BW project. Such compelling and convincing language directed to the public intends to gain public support through diminishing negative project externalities, mainly concerning the endangered social justice and the public interest.

In July 2012, the SPP became the ruling one, with the newly elected president and the national parliament. However, the local authorities in Belgrade kept the previous structure composed of most of the Democratic Party representatives. However, the dominance of the Progressives invoked the soon replacement of the city authorities. Hence, the vague statement from the mayor of Belgrade in the summer of 2013 revolving around the benefit “for all” reads as Djilas’s last attempt to create a tight relationship with the national government. As expected, he failed.

With placing the SPP political comrades in the Belgrade city authorities, the parliament, and the government, the BW story started to heat up to reveal the details deemed contradictory to Vučić's pre-election promises. The newly elected coordinators of the BW project (at the same time high-level SPP members) unveiled the specific nature of the new megaproject—the absence of tenders, and the flexibility in creating planning documentation, as backed up by the recently adopted legislation². Soon the UAE Eagle Hills officer presented the project to the Serbian government, and Vučić decided to become the main spokesperson for the BW project, with the sporadic support of his political fellows. However, their narrative was a grievance towards the general public. Namely, they directly accused people (“nothing is good enough for us Serbs”, “I have to ask you where you think we live”), disregarded the public comments (“someone who will find something wrong”), and overtly supported private developers (“other people's money must be respected”), instead of providing the direct answers to the concrete remarks, posed by the president of the Association of Architects of Serbia, among others. What lay behind such accusing rhetoric was not only safeguarding the developer's interests but more the need to hide their mutual relationship open for various inconsistencies and malversations due to the lack of institutional control of the feedback between high-level politicians and developers.

The public feedback to such a narrative was scarce. The non-governmental organisation Transparency Serbia emphasised the legal basis of the liaison between the government (providing land) and developers (securing money for urban development), and asked for a path-dependency in terms of respecting the existing regulations on public-private partnership and consulting the bodies which could offer useful advice. The Progressives stayed deaf to such demands and continued glorifying “Alabbar's project” ready to prepare all the planning documents to accommodate it. As this was not a standard procedure, i.e., usually project follows a plan and not vice versa, the Serbian politicians demonstrated they understood well the specificity of a megaproject development, as well as the readiness for its implementation.

In June 2014, after the early parliamentary elections, Vučić became the prime minister, and the determination to succeed in the BW project became more structured, followed by the narrative full of superlatives and transferring the image of BW to the entire country of Serbia³. Expert bodies close to the political regime (e.g., the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade) were engaged to prepare the necessary planning documentation to proceed with the project. However, they were not asked for any expert advice; rather, they were seen as a means to translate “the politicians' and the investor's agreements” into the planning instruments that will ease the project

² The Act Confirming the Agreement on Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of United Arab Emirates (Zakon o potvrđivanju sporazuma, 2013) legitimises the joint venture agreements to be made without an open tender procedure, while Serbia was obliged to adopt any changes to other laws and regulations in a way they are desirable for the foreign investor. Based on this law and the modified planning law (Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji, 2014), the Joint Venture Agreement was established in April 2015 (Perić, 2020a).

³ This reflected the governmental decision (May 2014) to declare Belgrade Waterfront as an “area of national importance” for the economic development of the country.

implementation⁴. The proactivity of the politicians was proven once again, as they undertook all the necessary procedural steps towards the project implementation—amended the master plan and changed the planning law to enable the production of a spatial plan, thus scaling up the entire procedure resulting in a “top-top” approach of governance and land use.

The independent experts not familiar with the political regime, such as the SANU board, presented their arguments against the draft Spatial Plan of Belgrade Waterfront, however, they did not tackle the core of the problem concerning the project. SANU referred only to the negative consequences on the city in terms of its functional organisation (“isolated island”, “traffic problems”). However, the activists brought the essence of the problematics highlighting opaque and opportunistic decision-making process instead of focusing on “the needs of the society”. The other group of independent experts (Academy of Architecture of Serbia) raised its voice against the project depicting it as “the largest illegal construction in the world”. However, such a tone was redundant as the Spatial Plan of Belgrade Waterfront (Uredba o utvrđivanju prostornog plana, 2015) was adopted in January 2015, i.e., two months earlier. To make this entire situation more complex, the president of the mentioned academy supported the project at the same time inducing some irrelevant conclusions (“everything new is met with such a [negative] reaction”) aimed to create public confusion. Such a discrepancy in the positions between the head of an organisation and its board, questions the independence and reliability of an expert body in fighting for the public interest. As the issue of legitimacy always coloured the narrative on BW, finally it was the group of Belgrade lawyers who questioned the decision-making process, the preparation and adoption of the planning documents, and even an announced enactment of the *Lex Specialis*⁵—the law that should define the public interest in the BW project. The law was adopted in a fast-track decision-making procedure in April 2015, hence intrinsically providing fruitful ground for managing all future megaprojects in Serbia.

Concluding Remarks

The discourse analysis of the daily press on the BW project elucidated not only the facts but also the general context within which a certain narrative is formed. It is the latter that requires greater attending, as “misinformation about costs, schedules, benefits, and risks is the norm throughout [mega]project development and decision-making” (Flyvbjerg, 2017, p. 8). More precisely, the facts, sometimes purposefully, stay hidden or become revealed rather late during the process, e.g., when some key

⁴ The Amendments on the Master Plan of Belgrade (The Amendments, 2014) were adopted by the City Assembly in September 2014. However, as this plan was not legally backed up (as it dismissed the procedure of international competition for the waterfront area and the change of the land-use and arrangements rules) the planning law was updated in December 2014 (Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji, 2014), to include new categories—areas with tourism potential, and areas of national importance—in the description of the coverage by the Spatial Plan for the Area of Specific Use (usually made for areas with natural and environmental values, mining areas, and areas with hydro potential) (Perić, 2020a).

⁵ *Lex Specialis*—The Law on Establishing the Public Interest and Special Procedures of Expropriation and the Issuance of Building Permit for the Project “Belgrade Waterfront” (Zakon o utvrđivanju javnog interesa, 2015).

decisions had been already taken. Hence, the discourse analysis proved to be a useful tool in addressing the project features and illuminating neglected contextual factors. These are elucidated in the following lines through the lens of conflicts and coalitions, decision-making flows, and power structures.

Conflicts and coalitions. Since the very first idea on the BW project development, its initiators excessively used the justifying and euphoric narrative on the “project of national importance” and incorporated this phrase in all the necessary legislation to secure the project implementation. The high-level politicians, depicted primarily in Vučić first as the prime minister and since 2017 as the president of Serbia, in the symbiosis with the Eagle Hills, was determined to push the private interest above national priorities. Interestingly, such close feedback between politics and money did not cause a huge negative reaction among the public. Oppositional political parties sporadically interrupted the glorifying discourse, professionals in the public institutions became the tool in the visible hand of politics, while independent experts were lacking consistency and clear argumentation, with usually late reactions. As expected, such a response did not put the experts in the spotlight and left the public with little or no beliefs in the validity of their remarks. The only actor showing a fierce and constant revolt against the dominant political panegyric was the civil sector. The fact that they appear in the newspapers just at the end of 2014 confirms that public to-the-point comments on the irregularities on numerous procedural steps were seriously taken by the politicians who purposefully limited their public visibility, framed within a broader context of non-transparent media coverage⁶.

Decision-making flows. Fuelled by the foreign developer’s investment, the Serbian political bodies fulfilled the necessary prerequisites to timely legitimate all the decisions that secured the project implementation. In other words, the required planning and legal documents were amended to embrace the changes that enable a smooth realisation of the BW project. For example, the Planning Law (*Zakon o planiranju i izgradnji*, 2014) was updated to accommodate modification of the categorisation of the spatial plans. This enabled assigning the BW project to the Spatial Plan of the Area of Specific Use (*Uredba o utvrđivanju prostornog plana*, 2015). In practical terms, a city master plan became a national spatial plan. The higher instance attribution served to simplify and accelerate the decision-making process, leaving the crucial decisions about the future project development to be made by the highest political bodies. In addition, the law that equals private interest of the Eagle Hills with the public interest of Serbia—*Lex Specialis* (*Zakon o utvrđivanju javnog interesa*, 2015) was urgently prepared and adopted (for three months), to legitimate the financial profit for the developer under the veil of public benefit. Such ad-hoc decision-making proves the role of politicians as quick learners eager to secure the required conditions for an exceptional, special, non-standard megaproject development at the expense of public accountability.

⁶ According to Freedom House (*Freedom in the World 2022. Serbia, 2022*), since its newly elected regime in 2012, Serbia has been continuously suffering from various “forms of political pressure on independent media and civil society organisations”. In 2022, Serbia’s status declined from “free” to “partly free” due to continued attempts by the government and allied media outlets to undermine independent journalists through legal harassment and smear campaigns, keeping the same status today (July 2022).

Power structures. In terms of power structures and their representation in public, the BW case shows a distorted version of megaproject development compared to liberal democracies, where developers have a leading role. Instead of the noticeable investors with quiet politicians, BW embraced the strong spokesperson of Vučić, while Alabbar's name was mentioned on rare occasions. However, this is not a sign of a strong state and a high level of governmental control. In contrast, as the BW is implemented in Serbia, a country with a high level of corruption and political patronage, i.e., the absence of control over the work of public bodies, Vučić's show-off in public hides the real power holders: Eagle Hills is silent and keeps its power far from the public eye. In addition, purposefully adopted autocratic role in decision-making power excludes all other parties but foreign developers. The illusion that the city mayor Mali has been heard in the entire process comes from the fact that he is a high SPP member and, hence, under the direct control of the key national figure as the president of the party. The absence of civil institutions and only the civil sector as a counterpart to the political hegemony illustrates a collapse of institutions, legal regulations, and society. Expert power is undermined: as the experts' statements designate that they are lost in the whirlpool of conflicting interests, without the necessary skills how to curb the private interests in a rudimentary market-economy, they have been left aside, serving only as the puppets needed to prepare the technical documentation under the reins of the national leader. Strategic thinking and strategic planning do not exist.

Urban megaprojects lead to deregulation and question the role and purpose of urban planning, which is additionally undermined by political favouritism. Strongly polarised national politics devoted to supporting private interests weakens the financial and institutional capacity of local authorities, erodes professional competences, and suppresses public opinions. As a result, a "top-top" approach in planning, governance and implementation of megaprojects in Serbia relies upon the series of legitimization procedures supported by the state to protect the false public interest. The transformation of these conditions requires diverse social, political, and economic changes that go far beyond what "good planning" can achieve. Nevertheless, the change starts with strengthening the role of the public institutions and a greater extent of governmental control of a megaproject development. Accordingly, basic recommendations for reducing the negative externalities of megaproject developments are as follows (Perić, 2020b; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018; Zeković & Maričić, 2022):

- Boost the autonomy of planners in making innovative procedures to create trust, mutual respect, and cooperation among numerous stakeholders
- Establish a synergy between experts and citizens to improve public dialogue and facilitate participation
- Strengthen the institutional capacity (both knowledge and finance) of local authorities to face the top-down decision-making
- Define the public interest through regulatory mechanisms to establish legitimacy
- Critically assess the discourse used in promoting megaprojects to dismiss the politicians' nationalist narrative

Only when Serbia paves the way towards democratic accountability will the populist political discourse vanish to enable transparent and collaborative mechanisms for protecting the public interest, overcoming polarisation, and boosting social equity as a counterflow to the “iron law” of megaproject development.

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