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Bratislava

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Article

Post-Socialist Urban Futures: Decision-Making Dynamics behind Large-Scale Urban Waterfront Development in Belgrade and Bratislava

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Abstract

This article discusses the implementation of two large-scale urban waterfront projects that are currently under construction in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) capital cities of Belgrade and Bratislava. Against the backdrop of post-socialist urban studies and recent reflections on urban or ‘world-city’ entrepreneurialism (Golubchikov, 2010), we reveal how both elite-serving projects are being shaped according to their very own structure and agency relations. Our comparative analysis unravels the power-geometry of the decision-making processes that reshape urban planning regulations of both transforming waterfronts. The path-dependent character of “multiple transformations” (Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012) in the CEE region can, even after three decades, still be traced within the institutional environments, which have been adapting to the existing institutional architecture of global capitalism. Yet, at the same time, the dynamic globalization of this part of the world intensifies its further attractiveness for transnational private investors. As a consequence, public urban planning institutions are lagging behind private investors’ interests, which reshape the temporarily-fixed flows of capital on local waterfronts into landscapes of profits, politics and power. We argue that suchlike large urban developments, focused on promoting urban growth, accelerate the dual character of these cities. Thus, while the differences between both investigated case studies are being highlighted, we simultaneously illustrate how national and local state actors respectively paved the way for private investors, and how this corresponds to similar overarching structural conditions as well as outcomes.

Keywords

Belgrade; Bratislava; large urban developments; post-socialism; state-rescaling; urban entrepreneurialism; waterfront transformations

Issue

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, urban waterfronts have been flourishing in recent years. Their widespread, yet geographically uneven re-emergence corresponds with the intensifying absorption of financial flows of capital into real estate in general, and iconic large urban developments (LUDs) in particular. For already more than half a century, global

circuits of capital, knowledge and policies have been temporarily fixed on spatially shifting urban frontiers, transforming derelict post-industrial urban sites into mixed-use luxury spaces for the new urban upper-middle class to live, work and consume (Desfor, Laidley, Stevens, & Schubert, 2011; Hoyle, Pinder, & Husain, 1988; Marshall, 2001). The political-economic origins behind these urban transformations are rooted in the structural crisis of

Atlantic Fordism and the subsequent switching of capital into urban development. Real estate and LUDs became the key intermediary between expanding financial flows of capital on the one hand, and extraction of the ground rent on the other (Aalbers & Haila, 2018).

Waterfront redevelopment has become exemplary of this new type of capital accumulation (Merrifield, 1993; Smith, 1991). It has furthermore been shown that their emergence is facilitated through variegated modes of entrepreneurial state-actors (Harvey, 1989; Kipfer & Keil, 2002). One of the key justifications legitimizing these urban strategies on behalf of those is the urban growth narrative, fuelled by the alleged necessity of inter-urban competition. Thus, urban waterfronts became the prime symbols of the changing nature of urban policies, which increasingly target external resources, on which cities seem to have become essentially dependent.

While the vast majority of insights on waterfront redevelopment and urban entrepreneurialism are still primarily derived from studies in the Anglo-Saxon case studies, similar geo-economic strategies are increasingly being observed in cities that are currently on the aforementioned frontiers of transnational capital investment (Golubchikov, 2010). This includes cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which are undergoing dynamic post-socialist transformations. While the underlying structural conditions behind these intra-urban changes are linked to very similar principles and mechanisms of contemporary capitalist urbanisation, the ways in which such redevelopments are eventually being implemented differ sufficiently, depending on the local cultural and institutional context (Peck, 2015; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). Existing institutional legacies and traditions indeed lead to different power relations and decision-making practices, materialized outcomes, and socio-economic consequences. At the same time, however, the implementation of large-scale waterfront development projects in itself generally accelerates institutional changes, such as regulatory experiments, responsible actors, or public-private policy networks. It is precisely this changing institutional context, in other words state-rescaling (Brenner, 2009), that traditionally counts as one of the central emphases within post-socialist studies.

Post-socialism as a concept originally used to serve as an analytical lens through which one could interpret and conceptualize the fundamental political economic and socio-spatial transformations that emerged in CEE, immediately after the revolutionary changes in 1989. Despite the intensifying discussion on today's relevance of the concept as an analytical tool for empirical research, as well as its position within urban theory (Ferenčuhová & Gentile, 2017; Hirt, 2013), some scholars continue to argue in favour of the path-dependent nature of post-socialism. According to them, the on-going transformations in urban space, social practices and institutional arrangements respectively, are inextricably

linked to one another (Bouzarovski, Sykora, & Matoušek, 2017; Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Rather than portraying post-socialism as an overarching spatial umbrella concept, it is argued that these multiple transformations have led to locked-in and path-dependent evolutionary trajectories of individual states.

In this article, we critically examine and compare the similarities and differences between two large-scale waterfront redevelopment projects: Sky Park in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, and Belgrade Waterfront in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. In particular, we aim to reveal how the structure-agency nexus in the decision-making processes behind the implementation of both projects re-shapes local planning regulations, and to what extent processes of strategic state rescaling are connected to the post-socialist context of both cities. We specifically look more closely at the capacities of urban planning departments to regulate and shape both LUDs that are currently under construction. This approach is supplementary to a number of previous studies that were conducted on these projects, which mainly focused on the lack of public participation and the regulatory and legal adjustments that were conducted (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018; Lalović, Radosavljević, & Đukanović, 2015). Our comparative study allows us not only to provide deeper insights into the structure and agency dynamics behind contemporary LUDs but also to contribute to on-going debates on 'actually existing' post-socialism. By recognizing the distinct political-economic trajectories that Slovakia and Serbia have undergone since 1989, we investigate to what extent the communist past still matters in contemporary urban development practices within their capitals. Furthermore, both cities generally remain underrepresented cases in urban studies literature, being in the shadow of other CEE cities such as Prague, Budapest, and Warsaw. For this reason, we believe that the insights presented in this article offer an original and valuable contribution to the ongoing academic debates on urban transformations in CEE.

The comparative analysis draws primarily upon carefully selected semi-structural in-depth interviews. Interviews were held with urban planning executives and experts in both cities, alongside a variety of other direct or indirect, public and private stakeholders. Additionally, for both projects, we conducted qualitative analyses of official planning documents and marketing materials, online media research, as well as attendance of public presentations.

We begin the theoretical part by discussing three mutually intertwined themes, all being closely interlinked to 21st-century global capitalism. Above all, we illustrate how contemporary capital accumulation on urban waterfronts in CEE is related to post-socialist state rescaling and the formation of urban entrepreneurialism. This is followed by the two aforementioned case studies and the decision-making dynamics behind the implementation of both LUDs. Subsequently, we address the similarities and differences between the two. The article

concludes with theoretical reflections based on the processes that we observed behind the implementation of both waterfront-LUDs.

2. From the Collapse of 'Equality' to the Entrepreneurial Spirit of 'Inequality'

The shifting narrative of an egalitarian, socialist society towards the animal spirit of competitive entrepreneurialism is being formed and domesticated in a variety of ways across the CEE region. After the implosion of the communist regime in 1989, individual countries underwent variegated trajectories on their return to capitalism. Liberalization of markets, deregulation of prices, privatization of public assets, and decentralization of power were only a few of the key measures that have triggered today's neoliberalization of the urban landscape within CEE. The post-socialist transition, thus consisting of multiple transformations (Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2012), can be put into parallel with what Brenner and Theodore (2002) called "institutional creative destruction."

Whereas the initial destructive forces in most cases dismantled the state's monopoly power and its institutional arrangements, the 'creative moment' of establishing new rules of the game alongside the political-economic integration into new centres of power, opened up new "spaces of engagement" (Cox, 1998). Deregulation and the dismantlement of the state in urban development contributed to the victory of an exchange over use-value, and therefore to losses of industrial heritage, real estate speculations, but also to an increase of socio-spatial inequalities. This era of 'roll back' neoliberalism fuelled the rise of antagonism among local citizens due to the lack of responsibility and transparency of municipalities in urban development in CEE (Peck & Tickell, 2002).

Yet, this initial phase of post-socialist 'roll back' neoliberalism has become a fertile ground for a second phase of the creative moment, namely 'roll out' neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell, 2002). This conceptual process, which has been widely observed across the North Atlantic during the early 1990s, is mainly characterised by entrepreneurial state leadership, new forms of governance, and the reform of regulations. One important precondition for such novel institutional arrangements is the emergence of the entrepreneurial city narrative (Jessop, 1998) which is currently increasingly embraced by political elites and policy makers throughout CEE. It is important to note here, however, that the exact transition between these two moments has a strong path dependent character, which justifies the lasting interests of scholars in actually existing post-socialism up until today.

The revolutionary changes that occurred in CEE from the late 1980s onwards indeed triggered essential scalar reconfigurations, so state-rescaling became a political strategy (Brenner, 2009). Similar to the hollowing out of the nation-state after the crisis of Atlantic Fordism in the advanced capitalist countries (Jessop, 2000), the transfer

of power in the majority of CEE countries, especially the ones entering the EU, went in both directions, upward and downward. This twin process is known as "glocalization" (Swyngedouw, 2004), and refers to the institutional restructuring from the national to a supranational and global scale, as well as to local, urban and regional scales, but also to the strategies of global inter-firm networks for their regional embeddedness. An important symptom of these structural changes of capitalism following the secular crisis in the 1970s, were changes in the nature of how cities were governed, resulting in place increasingly becoming an entrepreneurial asset (Harvey, 1989; Logan & Molotch, 2007). In order to obtain higher positions on several rankings of the inter-urban world hierarchies, cities have become increasingly competitive in attracting mobile resources through place branding strategies and thus became more commodified in themselves. Scholars have labelled these strategies enforced by cities with different terms such as "policy boosterism," adopting city-marketing and urban planning practices to globally circulating 'best-practices' (McCann, 2013); or "glurbanisation," which refers to place-based strategies specifying the glocal relations and searching for the niche in inter-scalar divisions of labour in the world economy (Jessop & Sum, 2000).

Based on all the above, it is important to realise that urban waterfronts have become not only passive recipients of the switching and fixing of capital, i.e., 'spatial-fix' (Harvey, 2001; Merrifield, 1993), but increasingly outcomes of neoliberal urban planning, and active entrepreneurial strategies on behalf of local governments (Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Jessop, 1997; Kipfer & Keil, 2002). They are, in other words, the frontiers where the capitalist and territorial logics of power meet each other (Harvey, 2005; Jessop, 2006). This distinction allows us to separate the growth logics from entrepreneurial practices, as two parallel forces behind contemporary urban development (Laueremann, 2018).

Three decades since the collapse of communism is a sufficient time period for a qualitative evaluation of the relationship between the real estate industry and urban planning. In particular, which logics did urban planning adopt, and which trends can be traced in the changing relations between urban planners, politicians, and the real estate sector? Scholars interested in post-1989 urban development in CEE extensively discussed the lack of transparency in urban planning, the speculative business culture, and broadly speaking the 'socialisation of risks and privatization of benefits' which made property developers and private investors the winners of the transition (e.g., Brabec & Machala, 2015; Cook, 2010; Horak, 2014; Suska, 2015). The role of local governance was, during the 'roll back' phase of the transition, associated with terms such as ad-hoc, fuzzy, or acting in a "fire-fighter style" (Feldman, 2000). However, a gradual institutional consolidation and adaptation to territorial planning based on the competition between multiple actors over space has steadily, at least in more advanced CEE

countries, led to rather standard forms of public-private cooperation and approaches to urban planning. Today's formation of the entrepreneurial narrative frequently overemphasizes the role of the built environment in delivering socio-economic growth and prosperity. This entrepreneurial strategy, known as property-led development, fuels the integration of growth logics, driven by real estate actors, into urban planning practices (Heeg, 2011). Such approaches are enforcing the built environment as a policy tool, however, it often narrows the focus down to aesthetic aspects. It is in this context that we introduce the emergence of, as well as the decision-making dynamics behind the formation of two waterfront LUDs in Belgrade and Bratislava.

3. A Regulatory Captured Waterfront in Bratislava: Introducing Zaha Hadid

The fall of the Iron Curtain opened a new historically important chapter for Slovakia. Even among the rapidly transforming CEE countries, its trajectory is particularly dynamic. The democratization of society accompanied by the decentralization of power, the transition to capitalism, the formation of the sovereign state with the capital city of Bratislava, EU membership, and the change between three currencies with the Euro being the last; all these events were compressed into two decades after 1989 and triggered fundamental spatial and socio-economic changes. Moreover, these were even accelerated by neoliberal measures put forward between 2002 and 2006 by the right-wing government, especially by the Minister of Finance Ivan Mikloš, which boosted the economy alongside rising inequalities within the country. The Slovak capital has been benefitting from the uneven geographical development within the country by its rapid, though unsustainable, urban growth. The trap of the mushrooming suburban ring in the metropolitan region of the city has occurred simultaneously with dynamic intra-urban transformations (Sveda & Suska, 2019).

The contemporary waterfront re-development in Bratislava is driven by multiple project-centric and profit-maximizing interests of primarily domestic real estate developers. The waterfront has become a matter of prestige and symbolic power for local real estate developers, related to their position on the domestic property market, as well as the key urban frontier of profit maximization (see also Machala, 2014). As one of the interviewed executive managers mentioned: "Our presence among powerful players at the centre of the capital gravity is a necessity." The relationship between the interests of the real estate industry and urban planning regulators is especially poignant when it comes to the decision-making processes behind LUDs that have been emerging on the waterfront since the beginning of the new millennium. One of the most recent ones is the flashy Sky Park project, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects and developed by Penta Real Estate. The mobilizing narra-

tive behind the project searches for parallels with the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. The Sky Park aims to become a new symbol of the city that attracts visitors and increases revenues of the city. However, as it will be shown, and contrary to the strong public alliance that stood behind the Guggenheim museum, the Sky Park is a project-centric initiative driven by a single real estate developer without any comprehensive strategy. Similar to other large-scale waterfront projects in Bratislava, this case reveals how the key decisions of public regulators were systemically developer-friendly. The evidence is illustrative for the on-going property-led waterfront re-development in Bratislava.

Unlike Copenhagen (Desfor & Jorgensen, 2004), Toronto (Laidley, 2007), or Hamburg (Schubert, 2011), the transforming urban waterfront in Bratislava is not led by any particular place-based strategy or public development agency. The strategic plan of the city itself has a questionable role in urban development. The executive manager of a large real estate developer active also in Bratislava expressed his experience with the following words:

I haven't really seen the strategic plan and I don't even know about this document. What we care about is the city land use plan and transport documentation—that's it. The strategic plan of the city is only a paper and the municipality does not foster any particular strategy in our negotiations. No-one really cares about strategic documents of the city, they are really something virtual.

Nevertheless, the narrative of the city's land use plan aims to reinforce the position of the city as "the new European metropolis on the Danube" (City of Bratislava, 2007, p. 5, part C), and the waterfront is a vital part of such planning regulation. Both city and regional-level planning documents highlight the representative functions of the waterfront, its high scenic value, above-regional importance, and the opportunity for extending the city centre. In particular, their land-use plans favour a concentration of congress centers, high-rise buildings, and headquarters of public institutions as well as transnational corporations on the waterfront. All things considered, urban planning regulations boost scenic and panoramic aspects of the waterfront through the emphasis on quality architecture, functions of high added value, and placement of the key institutions. As a consequence, the currently emerging entrepreneurial narrative, which overemphasizes the role of the built environment in delivering prosperity, is underpinned by the above-summarized framing of the city's land use plan.

The origins of the narrative introduced here can be traced back to 2008 when the Old City district initiated a zonal regulation for a roughly 22ha largely abandoned area known as the Chalupkova locality. The underlying urbanistic study, a planning document which formally precedes the elaboration of a zonal plan, had two key

ideas. First, an extension of mixed-use functions in this formerly industrial zone. Second, due to contaminated soil in the area (an environmental legacy of an aerial bombing of the Apollo refinery during World War II), the study suggested a conditional development. This meant a flexibilization of regulations (higher maximal indexes) in exchange for the decontamination of the soil. The completed study was delivered by the external author to the urban planning department of the city in 2008 and was supposed to serve as an underlying document for an update of the city's land use plan, as well as the compilation of the new zonal plan. However, it took twice as much time than it usually takes to finish the zonal plan, so only after 10 years, in 2018, it finally became a legal document (see Figure 1). During this period, Sky Park obtained all necessary permissions, so at the moment the zonal plan was launched, all had already been set.

In parallel to the compilation of the planning documents, the real estate developer organized an open private architectonic competition for the site between 2008 and 2010. The competition attracted some of the internationally well-known architectonic ateliers. The winning proposal, designed by Zaha Hadid architects, suggested amorphous solitaire towers for the site (see Figure 2). However, these became a central issue within negotiations between the investor and the urban planners, as the city's land use plan favoured here compact blocks of houses. This mismatch was raised by several urban planners, who openly questioned whether the final proposal is in line with the city's land use plan. They also admitted that the architect's celebrity reputation partly served as a powerful tool in the decision-making process. The role of urban planners has, according to some respondents, shifted from planners to lawyers due to



Figure 1. From left to right: The urbanistic study 2008; the approved zonal plan 2018. Source: The Old Town City District (2018).



Figure 2. Visualisation of the Sky Park project. Source: Penta Investments (n.d.).

asymmetric power relations behind the negotiations table. In other words, the profession has been reduced to a more legal, technical interpretation of the land use plan. Interviewed planners in non-executive positions of the city and city district who attended these negotiations respectively admitted that, “in the case of large-scale projects it’s like machinery and we are in the position of figurants.” Furthermore:

The negotiating power has, in production and enforcement of large urban projects, a critical role. The pressure of the powerful in negotiations accompanied by lawyers is often enormous....The degree of our influence in communication reflects or depends on the strictness of investors interests.

These statements offer important insights into the atmosphere of these negotiations and at the same time create a context in which the land-use regulation is re-shaped.

The eventual implementation of the Sky Park project is the result of multi-scalar power dynamics, built upon a series of developer-friendly decisions taken by the key decision-making regulators. First, the integration of the urbanistic study into the land use plan, led by the planning department of the city, was a highly selective process. According to the authors of the study, two important regulatory conditions were removed: (1) an upper limit for building heights, and (2) a buffer zone (30m) from a neighbouring electric transformer. Second, despite the fact that the city department of urban planning removed these conditions, and therefore softened the planning regulation, the city district could integrate them into the zonal plan (the zonal regulation is in the competence of city districts). Indeed, in 2012 the completed zonal plan was sent to the district authority, which is obliged to issue an official position to the legal and formal status of the zonal plan within 30 days. This is the last procedural step before the city district’s parliament can officially authorize the zonal plan. However, the district authority did not act within the legally bounded period, and thus paralyzed the zonal plan between 2012 and 2015. Several respondents, independently from each other, blamed the real estate developer for being in the background of the district authority’s inaction. Third, after the communal elections in 2014, the city department of urban planning and the newly elected mayor issued mandatory permissions for Sky Park between 2015 and 2016. Once a construction obtains such legal permission, it is mandatory for the city district to integrate them into the planning documentation. As the zonal regulation was not approved at that moment, the city district was obliged to do so. Thus, by issuing the mandatory permissions for Sky Park, the city secured the integration of the project into an already completed zonal plan, thereby torpedoing the efforts of the city district.

All in all, unravelling the role of individual scales behind the implementation of the Sky Park project illustrates how systemic the nature of the developer-friendly

decisions in the decisive moments really is. The city took the leading role in its materialization. It actively paved the path for the implementation of the Sky Park by a selective integration of the urbanistic study into the city land use plan, and by issuing the mandatory permissions it avoided the Old town city district. Thus the planning procedures, as well as the multi-scalar power dynamics, turned out to be highly favourable to facilitating the large scale project, which contributes to the maximization of the project-centric vision and ultimately the duality of the city. Finally, after 10 years, the Old town city district approved the Chalupkova zonal plan in February 2018, but it had zero effect on the Sky Park project

4. Belgrade Waterfront: Where Authoritarianism and Entrepreneurialism Meet

The idea of developing a large scale, mixed-use Waterfront area in Belgrade was first announced in 2012 by Serbia’s current president Aleksandar Vučić. Back then, he was taking part in the elections in order to become the city’s mayor. Despite his promises to bring an investor from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that was willing to help the city forward by developing an eye-catching real estate project on the city’s centrally-located but derelict Sava amphitheatre site, he did not become mayor that year. Soon after, however, Vučić did manage to rapidly pursue a successful political career by consecutively obtaining the positions of deputy prime minister, prime minister and eventually president. In the meantime, his political party (SNS) managed to gain an absolute majority on both the state and the local level. In this capacity, Vučić and his closest political allies have been able to appropriate the implementation of the project to a large extent, in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi-based transnational developer Eagle Hills.

Prior to providing more empirical details on the implementation strategies, institutional adjustments and the scalar power relations behind Belgrade Waterfront, it is important to note that the post-socialist trajectory that Serbia went through in the past three decades significantly differs from most other CEE countries. While the Yugoslav model of socialism already contained many differences as compared to other CEE states in the pre-1989 period, the tumultuous 1990s in Serbia were mainly characterised by war, state disintegration and international isolation. Hence, capitalism and democracy were to a lesser extent embraced. Instead, the former *nomenklatura* members for many years succeeded in maintaining their system of interlocking positions in the dominant political and economic spheres (Lazić, 2015). This is one of the reasons why land in Serbia, contrary to many other CEE countries, has remained state-owned (Hirt, 2013): an arrangement that dates back from a law that was signed in 1995. Although from the early 21st century onwards state monopoly over urban development was gradually to be replaced through processes of decentralization, privatization and entrepreneurialism (City

of Belgrade, 2003; Nedović-Budić, Zeković, & Vujosević, 2012), the state ownership of urban land designated for construction has as yet been untouched. This particular post-socialist legacy is not only an important backbone of power for the political elite, but it also provides exactly the institutional context that made Belgrade such an attractive destination for transnational real estate developers.

The eventual arrival of the foreign Belgrade Waterfront developer in 2014 did not go unnoticed. The promise of a 3.5 billion-dollar investment soon led to a lot of speculation and conspiracy theories amongst citizens and fierce opponents of the plan such as opposition politicians and excluded domestic architects. In the Belgrade Waterfront brochure that was soon released, Eagle Hills describes itself as a company that “develops flagship city destinations that invigorate aspiring nations, [h]elping countries raise their global profiles to new heights” (Eagle Hills, n.d., p. 8). Their chairman, Mohamed Alabbar, is a well-known real estate businessman from Dubai who possesses close ties to the UAE’s rulers (Buckley & Hanieh, 2014). In his capacity as chairman of Emaar Properties, another state-related developer, he has a lot of experience when it comes to LUDs in the UAE itself. This is important to note since the way in which Belgrade Waterfront is being implemented in terms of urban design (see Figure 3) marketing strategies (see Figure 4), as well as decision-making, is very reminiscent of how real estate development usually takes place in Dubai (see Acuto, 2010; Koelemaij, 2019). In order to allow this development to actually happen, the Serbian political elite facilitated a number of widely-contested institutional adjustments.

First of all, the fact that Eagle Hills suddenly arrived with an instant urban design for the Sava amphitheatre was, according to many opponents of the plan, conflicting with existing planning documents on behalf of the City Assembly, which required a public tendering process for an architectural competition. Secondly, civil servants from the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade, who had been for a few years responsible for developing urban master plans, admitted in an interview that the new planning document that included, and thus ‘legalized’ the Belgrade Waterfront project, came on behalf of the Republic Agency for Spatial Planning:

The government of Serbia has made a decision to declare this part of the city an area of great significance. Basically, this kind of plan goes under the jurisdiction of the Republic. Not the city. The city has the master plan, and detailed urban plans: This is the main division of the plans in the city, but this special spatial plan [of “national importance”] is something that goes under the jurisdiction of the Republic. (See also Republic of Serbia, 2014)

Subsequently, in early 2015, a *Lex Specialis* was introduced (Republic of Serbia, 2015), which specifically served to facilitate Belgrade Waterfront’s development by issuing the building permit to start the construction while overruling existing laws regarding building conditions, such as the maximum allowed height of a building.

At the same time, the Republic of Serbia and Eagle Hills signed a joint venture agreement through which they established the Belgrade Waterfront Company. According to this contract, which was revealed to the



Figure 3. The ‘instant design’ of Belgrade Waterfront as presented within the original brochure. Source: Eagle Hills (n.d.).



Figure 4. A billboard close to the construction site, advertising the project. Photograph by the authors.

public several months later after on-going demand for more transparency regarding the project, Eagle Hills largely provides the financial ‘inputs’ along with dictating the urban design as well as the marketing and sales strategies, while the Serbian state was required to enable any means necessary for implementing the project. Decontaminating the soil and preparing the basic infrastructural utilities on the construction site are examples of the latter, alongside the aforementioned institutional and regulatory adjustments. Additionally, it appeared from the contract that the investor is leasing the nearly 80 hectares of land for a period of 99 years (Belgrade Waterfront Company, 2015; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018).

What started as a personal prestige project of contemporary president Aleksander Vučić soon resulted in a dynamic network of actors representing different scalar levels and institutional arrangements. While Eagle Hills exclusively co-operates with international partners for designing the project, the Serbian government arranges local construction firms. At the same time, responsible state actors are somewhat ambivalent about their level of interaction with the Eagle Hills head office in Abu Dhabi. This was mainly illustrated by the Mayor’s

Office Chief of Staff, interviewed in 2016, who simultaneously represents the Serbian government at the Belgrade Waterfront Company shareholders meeting, a position he obtained thanks to his close relationship with then mayor Siniša Mali, in turn a close political ally of Vučić. Besides acting as if the Serbian government, or in other words him, Mali and a number of others, were completely in control of everything, he was also willing to admit that some implementation practices were forced upon them ‘from above’ as well. One example hereof is the aggressive marketing campaign of the project across public spaces throughout the city, something which they knew would be disapproved of by many citizens, but still got pushed through by those with more decision-making power: “We are not dealing with that [advertising campaign], it’s an investor-story you know...they provide the finance and they’re taking care of the project, because that’s something that they do best, you know. We cannot do that.”

The local managers from the Belgrade-based Eagle Hills office (which later merged into the Belgrade Waterfront Company), interviewed in 2015, generally applied very similar justifying rhetoric as the Mayor’s Office Chief of Staff. Interestingly though, they admit-

ted that they were “positively surprised” by the amount of freedom that the Serbian government had provided them with. According to them, said the Head of Business Development and Sales: “They are willing to make our job easier, to an extent we usually do not get.” They furthermore argued that changes in the law were actually a necessity since the current investor climate in Serbia is not suitable for the fast-changing international property market. Hence, they kept emphasizing the importance of “speeding up processes, otherwise, it will never work.” They saw it as their biggest challenge to “change the mindset of the [Serbian] people,” which they believed was a lot more difficult than constructing the real estate, even though the “client psychology works the same everywhere.” This is why, besides targeting the Serbian diaspora as potential buyers and sharing optimistic numbers regarding their levels of pre-sales, they were also actively involved in strategies related to improving the public discourse on the project. At the same time, however, they also indicated that they were often receiving direct instructions from the Abu Dhabi-based head office, which again indicates the ‘scalar hierarchies’ underlying the Belgrade Waterfront project.

Within the scope of this article, there are a number of features regarding Belgrade Waterfront that are particularly relevant to highlight. It has been illustrated how local urban planning civil servants are largely excluded from the planning process, while previous plans are being overruled by newly established ‘special purpose’ plans that come along with legal and institutional adjustments. These are being justified by the investor and the responsible government actors alike by emphasizing the inevitable need to adapt to the rules of the game of contemporary global capitalism. Furthermore, Serbia’s particular post-socialist legacy, which is characterised by still very powerful central state institutions which also possess much of the land, has allowed Belgrade Waterfront to be implemented in ways that echo authoritarian, speculative capital-driven real estate development practices within the UAE itself. While several scholars have addressed the severe dual city realities that exist in the UAE (e.g., Acuto, 2010), many critical voices in Belgrade have raised their concerns about the alleged mismatch between the elite-driven Belgrade Waterfront project and the average purchasing power within the city. Besides, Stanković (2016) highlights the forced displacement of a number of residents from the future construction site, while creative entrepreneurs in the adjacent area of Savamala feel threatened by the project’s future spatial claims (Wright, 2015). In other words, one could indeed argue that the project will contribute, and is already contributing to urban dualities.

5. The Comparative Reflection

The urban waterfronts in both capitals are undergoing significant changes. At first glance, Bratislava’s Sky Park and Belgrade Waterfront are being shaped by fairly sim-

ilar processes. Not only do they overlap in terms of attracting a lot of external attention as mixed-use and eye-catching architectural LUDs that materialize capital flows and of eye-catching architecture, which are supposed to up-scale the cities’ global profiles (Golubchikov, 2010). They also contribute to the formation of the entrepreneurial narrative, backed by a property-led development and thus the emphasis on the role of the built environment in delivering future prosperity (Heeg, 2011). Alongside these similar features, however, there are a number of cardinal differences regarding the implementation of both projects, as a result of the local context they are situated within.

Waterfront redevelopment in Bratislava is an example of ‘naturally’ market-driven transformation, formed into multiple LUDs, and led primarily by domestic real estate developers. The entrepreneurial narrative, emphasizing the quality development of the built environment, is currently being intensified and is based on a selective and technical interpretation of the city land use plan. The entrepreneurial vision of Sky Park is driven by a single real estate developer which increases vulnerabilities regarding its potential failure (Doucet, 2013), and ultimately contributes to the production of dual socio-economic realities within the city. The multi-scalar power dynamics behind its implementation can be observed between the state (the city district authority which acts as construction authority), the city (the department of urban planning and the mayor), and the city district (the department of urban planning and the Districts’ mayor) scales respectively. The urban scale turns out to be the key vehicle delivering the project, although the state actor plays an important role by paralyzing the city district as well. The case study indicates that in Bratislava, ties between public and private actors are characterized by systemic developer-friendly decisions on multiple scales.

Belgrade Waterfront, on the other hand, is a strong top-down political strategy of a single LUD. Here, allied politicians and public institutions are actively involved through legal (a *Lex Specialis*) and institutional (the Belgrade Waterfront Company) instruments. The state scale is the key vehicle for delivering the project, alongside the UAE-based transnational developer. The project is significantly different from Sky Park in this regard. It has been legitimized as being of national importance (see also Čamprag, 2019), and through personal relations between the political elite and the transnational capital, it forms a multi-scalar growth coalition (Logan & Molotch, 2007). This particular power geometry is only possible due to the deviant post-socialist context of Serbia.

Despite the above-mentioned differences, the fundamentally uneven power-relations between real estate developers and urban planning regulation is strikingly similar in both cities. In both cases, regulators have systematically adjusted regulations in favour of the project-oriented interests of these LUDs.

6. Conclusion

This article has, first of all, illustrated that it is currently not rare to find cases of ambitious LUDs within CEE. We argue that whereas there is not an explicit growth narrative per se, urban planning is increasingly forced to be driven by rent-seeking interests of the real estate industry, justified by the entrepreneurial narrative of property-led development. The way these projects are being implemented, however, can differ significantly. These differences are still largely caused by inherited institutional practices from the past, or in other words the particular post-socialist trajectories that countries have taken.

Slovakia has undergone a historically dynamic trajectory during the last three decades. Alongside obtaining independence, the post-socialist transition followed the ‘shock therapy’ recipe, which was accompanied by the decentralization of responsibilities and competences to lower scales of government. Thus, widely-assumed processes of glocalisation indeed occurred, partly as a result of joining the European Union. In other words, the inter-related processes of state-rescaling and urban entrepreneurialism are to a large extent reminiscent of examples from the Anglo-Saxon context: local governments have become the dominant actors that are increasingly facilitating growth-oriented, property-led developments such as Sky Park. Since Serbia’s trajectory has been more chaotic, and generally more ‘deviant’ as compared to other CEE-countries, national-level state actors still have relatively much decision-making power, and thus local state actors are actually easily bypassed and overruled. In both cities, one can observe how urban planning practices have recently become dominated and dictated by logics relating to capital accumulation and a speculative form of world city entrepreneurialism (Golubchikov, 2010). However, since the associated state-rescaling dynamics are so different, this happens somewhat more subtle in Bratislava, while in Belgrade the way in which the project is being implemented is more authoritarian.

Structural drivers, related to globally circulating capital, policies and ideologies, are clearly present across cities in CEE. Once they touch the ground, however, they become ‘real,’ and differences start to emerge. These differences are caused not only by the important role of agency, as both our case studies also revealed, but also by the inherited, path-dependent institutional context. This article thus contributes to on-going debates on the applicability of structural, universal theories such as ‘actually existing’ neoliberal urbanism, as well as of overarching spatial concepts such as post-socialism. We argue that the latter can still be useful as a lens through which one could look at contemporary urban transformations within CEE since it allows you to grasp the structure-agency nexus. On the other hand, however, one should be careful not to take CEE for granted as a geographic region, since our research has proven that trajectories of individual countries within the region can be significantly different.

Urban entrepreneurialism has been observed across the North-Atlantic from the 1980s onwards. The contemporary entrepreneurial strategies in Bratislava and Belgrade are not innovative, but rather imitate property-led development from elsewhere. Many critical scholars, besides Harvey (1989) or Mollenkopf and Castells (1991), warn us that these tend to contribute to increasing dualities, which means that instead of the popular trickle-down growth-narrative, social and spatial inequalities may subsequently increase. Further research on this topic should, therefore, deal with the exact socio-spatial consequences of newly established Waterfront-LUDs across the CEE once they are finished within the upcoming years.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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