

Don't let them d(r)own

*Interview with Dobrica Veselnovic and Ksenija Radovanović,
Ne da(vi)mo Beograd¹*

The citizens' initiative "Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own" ("Ne da(vi)mo Beograd") was formed in 2014 as a reaction to the imposition of the "Belgrade Waterfront" project ("Beograd na void"). According to Belgrade's planning department, "Belgrade Waterfront is a project for which the city has waited for more than 50 years²". The entire project is worth more than 3 billion euros and could take 30 years to complete. By the time it ends, Belgrade should have a new opera house, shopping centre and luxury hotels and apartments. Critics say that the whole process of planning and decision-making lacked any transparency and democratic legitimacy. Since its beginning Ne da(vi)mo Beograd has organised a number of actions. It is collected and disseminated much needed information about the project of "national significance", actively made use of all existing institutional ways of citizen participation and called people to the streets. These protests that started as a reaction to an urban development project have recently drawn up to 25,000 people, making them among the largest protests in recent Serbian history.

"Ne da(vi)mo Beograd" is made up of people of different profiles, professions, and beliefs, who share the feeling of responsibility for their city, its processes and its problems, its present and its future. Their activities have one aim in common: to stop the degradation and the depletion of the city's public spaces, done in the name of ostentatious urban and architectural mega-projects in Belgrade and other cities in

1 | This interview took place in November 2016.

2 | "Controversy surrounds Belgrade Waterfront development" Guy Delauney, BBC News June 21 2016 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-36576420>)

Serbia. They aim to reassess urban and cultural policies in view of the sustainable development of cities and argue for a more just distribution of common resources, while enabling the inclusion of citizens in the development of their environment.

How did the protests start and what have been the key moments and achievements?

From its initial launch, we have opposed the Belgrade Waterfront mega-urban development project. We were trying to stop the city government of Belgrade from changing laws and procedures that regulate the development of the city, that they wanted to do to allow for the continuation of this project. For instance, when representatives of the city government proposed changes to the General Urban Plan, we organised professionals and interested citizens and proposed around 2,000 complaints. Needless to say that the Commission did not pay attention to them. Once they showed that they do not care about public debate and the opinions of professionals and citizens, as well as about legislation and law in general, we decided to stop participating in legislative processes regulating city development. We started protesting in various ways at the public hearing where the new Spatial Plan for this area was proposed. After that, we staged protests, entitled “*Let’s show them duck!*” on the occasion of the signing of the investment agreement. In Serbian slang ‘to duck’ means to trick or to commit fraud. Because of this, we established a yellow duck as a symbol for the protests, as it is the most common visualisation of this.

The latest protests brought more than 25,000 citizens onto the streets to oppose the Belgrade Waterfront project and to denounce the criminal deeds that were committed in order to proceed with the envisaged plan. The occasion for this protest was the demolition of a whole street, including privately owned houses, and the severe violation of the citizens’ rights of freedom of movement, liberty and security. In detail: during the night of April 25th 2016, a group of masked people illegally demolished the whole street within the area designated for the project with three dredgers, including several privately owned houses. During the demolition they temporarily detained passers-by and security employees of private enterprises, restricting their freedom of movement and severely violating

their liberty, personal integrity and right to property. The police were advised not to react to citizens' reports during the demolition, deliberately refusing to respond to citizens' calls for help, while those on site were harassed.

What impact has the protest had on Belgrade's politics? How do established politicians react to it?

Politicians that are "in power" have made a conscious effort to ignore what happened that night in Savamala and, for weeks, they tried to ignore the people on the streets asking for answers. Because this strategy failed they turned to plan B, which includes ongoing attempts to discredit the people who lost their homes and property that night and in the last two years, as well as attempts to discredit individuals and organisations helping the protests. It seems like their strategy is to distract the public from the main question: what kind of society do we live in if the citizens' well-being is considered less important than anything else? In addition, parties of the opposition tried to take over the protests, while constantly failing to make use of their institutional position, confirming that the path towards a people-oriented politics will be hard, but is necessary.

What do you hope to achieve in the end? And what would be a success today?

My hope is that we can show that a different politics is possible, and in that line, that also a different city is possible. With our actions we are trying to get back the hope that change "from the bottom" is possible. In that process we are also trying to empower the citizens to reclaim rights that are under attack. On a smaller scale, we believe that there is a strong and tangible chance to force the government to give up this problematic waterfront project, while also not to attempt anything similar in the future. That argument is called public pressure. We are aware that this is a marathon, but as the number of people who are ready to say "no" to the disrespectful behaviour of the government is increasing, we are more and more confident that we will succeed.

Can the "Belgrade Waterfront" project and the protest against it be seen as a representative case for general developments in Post-Yugoslavian Eastern Europe?

Yes of course. This project is a paradigm of how cities are shaped upon entering the “transition” period. The main characteristic is that the processes happen without respect for the public interest. We see a constant shrinking of the public sphere, leading to violent changes in the environment, city neighbourhoods and natural surroundings. All of this for the profit of the narrow circle of people who are members of the economic elite associated with the political elite. But, to be optimistic, the resistance shown in Belgrade and other cities throughout Europe tells us that citizens are aware of this.

What can other cities learn from the protest?

We think that the citizens of other cities in Serbia and throughout Europe are starting to realise that they have lost the power to make decisions concerning the design of their everyday life. This is most evident in cities where we see more and more voices demanding the availability of public spaces for public use, increased participation in public affairs and generally more democracy. In the broadest sense we can see the emergence of calls for the appropriation of the right to our cities.

In Belgrade we are very carefully watching the experiences of other movements such as Podemos, Barcelona en Comú, the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), European Alternatives, the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA) etc. Because only with collective action and solidarity we can drive the waves of change. In that sense, every contact, every visit, every support and exchange that we make is crucial for our fight. Europe will not be changed by itself. We, the citizens of Europe, must do it together.