

Learning from Arnstein's Ladder:  
From Citizen Participation to Public Engagement

Citizen Participation in Transitional Society:  
An Evolution of Participatory Planning in Serbia

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**Abstract:** Arnstein's seminal article influenced both the scholars and practitioners to explore the ways of citizen engagement against the public administration and politicians. To illustrate this, I present the case study of Serbia through four phases of its planning history. After the Second World War, the top-down spatial planning for social good was controlled by the elite multidisciplinary technocratic decisions. Citizens were just *informed* about the possibilities for public insight and debate. The state decentralization of the 1970s, influenced the shift of planning from the state focused allocation to the community responsive planning, based on *delegated power* of the civil sector in *partnership* with representatives of local politics. In the 1990s, when and development process was almost exclusively driven by private investment greenlighted by the national government, the citizen participation was not even *manipulated* – it did not exist, neither in planning legislation, nor in planning practice. Today, Serbia faces the privatization of state land and resources, while experts try to find their own place in an arena of manifold interests, making the citizens able to exercise only 'de jure' public *consultation*. The need for substantial citizens involvement is indisputable, however, the step towards its implementation follows the democratic development of Serbia.

**Keywords:** Sherry Arnstein, public engagement, transitional society, Serbia

## Introduction

Arnstein used the metaphor of a ladder to describe examples of citizen participation that projected the cutting-edge progress upward – from securing political rights to obtaining economic justice. People would obtain greater influence for the places they live in by using types of participation with greater access to political authority. Organized civil disobedience and nonviolent protests proved useful in stopping bad redevelopment and highway projects. However, poor people were not integrated into political positions of influence; some other planning approaches (e.g. advocacy or equity planning) dealt with such efforts (Davidoff, 1965; Krumholz *et al.*, 1975). Moreover, global financial crisis of the 1970s affected the shift towards neoliberal governance promoting competition. This designated the crisis for citizen participation, too. The neoliberals weakened the legitimacy and coherence of the state as an instrument for enhancing citizen sovereignty, while increasing divisions that enable elites to lobby for favorable financial benefits. However, the social democracy in the United States (US) called

for citizen participation again – in planning theory this resulted in ‘communicative-argumentative turn’ (Forester, 1989) and, therefore, the resurgence of Arnstein’s approach.

Why should we use Arnstein’s seminal article for the analysis of the Serbian spatial planning that is quite different to the briefly reviewed US context? Due to its universal nature, the ‘ladder’ here serves as a tool for elucidating the “gradations of citizen participation” (Arnstein, 1969: 217). Exploring citizen participation in the challenging case of Serbia means discovering a variety of nuances of public involvement – from passive observers to controllers of urban development. Moreover, the Serbian case clearly illustrates that participation cannot be taken for granted – it must be won over and over again. What is the impact of participation or who has the right to decide? Answering this question helps elucidate participatory planning in both socialist Yugoslavia and ‘proto-democratic’ Serbia. More precisely, this chapter seeks to identify the extent and contextual dependence of participation in the decision-making processes observed through various periods of Serbian planning history.

The chapter is structured as follows. I start with an overview of participatory planning in Serbia in relation to the more general social system covering both the socialist and post-socialist period. This is followed by a distinctive example of how contemporary planning practice responds to citizens’ demands for transparent and inclusive planning. In the discussion part, two specific periods of Serbian planning history are presented: authoritarian regime of the 1970s and 1980s when the public interest was the main system value and instruments for public involvement were advanced, in contrast to contemporary pluralistic society that overrides the voice of powerless citizens. The chapter concludes with basic operational recommendations for improving the participatory planning approach in a highly challenging society.

### **Citizen participation in Serbian spatial planning**

Serbia has undergone tremendous changes in its political, economic and, thus, planning system. As the societal context within which the planning system is embedded provides the framework for the citizens to express and materialize their own interests (by taking part in creating certain policies and implementing particular instruments), the next section briefly describes the extent and nature of citizen participation in spatial planning decision-making in Serbia. Four periods of Serbian planning history, following the main transformation of Yugoslavia (Figure 1) since the Second World War, are identified: 1) integrated planning (1945–1974), 2) participatory planning (1974–1989), 3) centralized planning (1989–2000), and 4) market-led planning (2000–present).

#### ***Integrated planning (1945–1974)***

The end of the Second World War was a great turning point in Serbian history: in economic terms, the poorly developed agrarian economy was replaced by a centralized planned economy (Zukin, 1975; Liotta, 2001; Perić and Miljuš, 2017), while in political terms, after a short phase of communism (1945–1950), Yugoslavia started ‘experimenting’ with a new brand of socialism accompanied by decentralization, opening to the (state-controlled) market-economy, loans programs with international organizations, and self-management, i.e. societal ownership over productive resources and management of public enterprises by their employees (Ramet, 1995). Following this logic, self-governed interest-driven local communities started to emerge as the main player at the local decision-making level shortly after 1953 (Veselinović, 2017).

Urban planning also experienced great transformation in less than two decades: from a tool to support socio-economic development (Dawson, 1987), across physical planning (i.e. land-use and zoning) introduced in 1957, to integrated and comprehensive planning based on interdisciplinarity among all relevant sectors when dealing with spatial issues (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić, 2006). Looking through the lens of public participation in plan making, even the first postwar planning law (of 1949) prescribed the procedure of public insight into the draft version of a plan, while the laws from 1960s and 1970s considered citizen participation as societal support and

plan verification (Zukin, 1975). However, such planning legislation did not generate real participatory planning practice; rather, participation in planning was raised by the activities of local community on the issues of local interest (Fisher, 1962; Veselinović, 2017).

*Figure 1: Territorial transformation of Yugoslavia over time: Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1945–1989 (top), Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, 1992–2006 (middle), Republic of Serbia, 2008–present (bottom)*



Source: Own interpretation

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### ***Participatory planning (1974–1989)***

The Constitution from 1974 prescribed further territorial decentralization of the federal state, more developed mechanisms for citizen participation, and support for the self-management system (Lydall, 1989). This mixed-economy continued to reinforce an arena for including actors other than public sector ones in spatial planning activities (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić, 2006). The decentralized system of decision-making was applied to social, economic and spatial planning and policy, and shared by the federal, republic, and local authorities and individual enterprises (Dawson, 1987).

Previously initiated efforts to integrate physical planning into the socio-economic planning system caused the shift in planning as exclusively expert-driven activity: planning legislation (1974) identified local communities as the crucial planning and implementation bodies, and public discussion on the draft plan appeared a regular practice (Čolić, 2009; Maričić *et al.*, 2018). In 1985 the law was updated to improve the coordination and integration of plans and policies, introducing the instrument of expert debate not only on the final, but also on the first draft of a plan (Vujošević and Nedović-Budić, 2006). However, although planning and socio-economic policy usually move together, they have different pace. Influenced by global economic crisis, by the late 1970s Yugoslavia struggled economically (hyperinflation, debt, trade imbalance) and faced internal political tensions and the need to eliminate self-management by 1990 (Mencinger, 1991). In contrast to this, planning still followed the trajectory of decentralization until the mid-1990s (Vujošević, 2003).

### ***Centralized planning (1989–2000)***

The fall of the Berlin Wall had substantial social and economic consequences on Europe, however Yugoslavia additionally suffered from the disintegration of its territory, accompanied by civil wars and nationalistic tendencies in all the newly formed states. As a result, Yugoslavia was politically re-centralized (Ramet, 1995), the economic system’s change towards market-based economy was slow due to the absence of institutional capacity (Liotta, 2001), and the authoritarian political regime brought political, social, and, thus, spatial degradation (Zurnić, 2019).

In the 1990s, the national government, i.e. the Ministry of Construction, took over the role of the key actor in spatial planning decision-making (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić, 2006). Corruption, non-transparent decision-making procedures, and unregulated economic measures influenced close relationship between the highest government level and the private investors (Zeković *et al.*, 2015; Vujošević *et al.*, 2012; Vujović and Petrović, 2007; Zurnić, 2019). Such symbiosis neglected social goals and greatly endangered citizen participation. Decentralization in planning domain (as prescribed by the law from 1995) was an illusion: master urban plans prepared by local authorities' had symbolic purpose as the central political power directly influenced planning practice at any territorial level (Vujošević and Nedović-Budić, 2006).

### ***Market-led planning (2000–present)***

In late 2000, Serbia created a democratically elected government for the first time after more than half a century thus designating the start of a pluralist political culture and a re-decentralization of power. Nevertheless, the absence of appropriate measures, institutional capacity, and political reforms when embracing a market-driven economy constitutes 'a messy and uneven process' (Cope, 2015). Another pillar of a neoliberal system is also challenged in the Serbian society still considered a 'proto-democracy' (Vujošević, 2010). Consequently, spatial planning instruments are ineffective and citizen involvement is low (Maričić *et al.*, 2018).

Three crucial laws clearly illustrate the weak position of spatial planning in the transitional social and political context of Serbia. The planning law from 2003 cancelled the expert debate and even abolished the possibility of informing the public about the beginning of the procedure of public insight, therefore only the debate among the members of the plan approval commission remained (Čolić, 2009). In 2004, the law on privatization made it possible for private consortia to buy the state (social) enterprises, while the new planning law (2009) converted (building and land) use-right into the ownership-right (Perić and Miljuš, 2017). Although the public opinion finds the legal support in the modified planning law from 2014 – 'early public insight' allows citizens to express their opinion on certain urban issues in an early phase of plan making – public voices are not heard enough, citizens are mainly passive recipients of information, and civil sector is usually omitted from the urban decision-making process (Perić and Maruna, 2012; Maruna and Čolić, 2017). Only grassroots movements appear to act as a public interest advocate (Grubbauer and Čamprag, 2019).

### **Methodology**

The previous historical analysis of societal context (socio-political and economic system) and planning system served to identify the position of citizen participation in a planning process through various periods. The following sections elucidate the extent and dynamics of public engagement.

First, I conduct in-depth qualitative case study of the Belgrade Waterfront (BW) project as a paradigmatic example of the current urban development in Serbia. Briefly: 1) I screen the laws, plans, strategies, regulations, and contracts to describe critical relationships between the private developers' incentives and the public sector's responses to them, 2) using the discourse analysis of the media announcements provided by the civil sector organizations between 2012 (i.e. since first advertising on the BW project in the media) and 2017 (in order to keep a proper distance to the present moment), I identify the main narrative among citizenry and their critical remarks to the steps taken in both preparation and implementation of the BW project, and 3) using the content analysis of scholarly articles on the current urban development in Serbia, in addition to previous, I critically assess the professional position towards citizen engagement in public issues with considerable spatial impact.

Second, I draw a comparison based on the Arnstein's seven 'gradations of citizen participation' between two periods of Serbian planning history: the period of the 1970s and 1980s glorifying citizen participation in planning, and the contemporary phase neglecting public involvement. However, as the periods are interpreted considering

also the societal context and not only the formal planning procedures, I derive conclusions on deeper patterns and impact of citizen participation that diminish the initially perceivable contrast between the two periods.

### **Case study: the Belgrade Waterfront project**

Most of the countries and cities of the post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) faced the social, political, economic and cultural transformation in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More precisely, limited role of planners, neoliberal transition, post-socialist transformation, shift to the western model of democratic decision-making, orientation of the legislation towards legitimization of illegal developments, etc. all set the course for a dynamic socio-spatial restructuring in CEE (Stanilov, 2007; Tasan-Kok, 2004; Tsenkova and Nedović-Budić, 2006; Hirt, 2005; Doytchinov *et al.*, 2015). The ex-Yugoslav republics, today all independent states, followed the same transitional pattern, delayed for a decade though.

Before elucidating the current controversies around the BW project, a brief history of the site development is shown (Kovačević, 2014; Perić, 2016; Perić and Hoch, 2017). The idea to create the new urban center of Belgrade on the right bank of the Sava River, at the bottom of the so-called Sava Amphitheater, was embedded in the first master plan of Belgrade of 1923. As it was recognized as a site of regional and even national importance in all the following Belgrade master plans, its potential was explored through a number of studies and urban design competitions organized during the 1970s and 1980s, in the golden era of Yugoslav urban planning and design. The most famous are: the project Sava Amphitheater (designed by Miloš Perović in 1975), and the study Town on Water (*Varoš na vodi*), by the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade in 1990, important for they included both banks of the Sava River in order to reset Belgrade's urban history and place some public buildings (opera, museums), which Belgrade still lacks today. Even during the 1990s in time of great political crisis, economic sanctions and poverty, the project Europolis (1995) was developed for the area of the Sava Amphitheater, as a capital project of the authoritarian political regime. In the next twenty years, the area continued to deteriorate, and, thus, became one of the largest brownfield areas in the Belgrade central zone covered by old railway tracks and dilapidated housing. The BW project was for the first time announced as the flagship project during the 2012 political campaign of the then largest opposition party, which won the elections with a great majority of the vote. The cornerstone for its future development was set in September 2015, designating a grand political project financed by Eagle Hills, a United Arab Emirates (UAE) investor, with considerable subsidies provided by Serbian government.

The controversial BW project, covering almost 90-hectares close to the confluence of two rivers and the historical core of the city of Belgrade (Figure 2), is currently seen as paradigmatic in the public and real estate domains in Serbia. For the political structures, it is a 'best practice' example of urban development. But professionals claim it as a drastic usurpation of both the formal planning procedures and professional expertise, while citizens have been constantly struggling for more transparency and active involvement in the decision-making process. In sum, the BW project depicts the absence of: 1) accountability in decision-making, 2) monitoring and control systems, and 3) mechanisms for evaluating social, economic, and environmental impacts (Zeković *et al.*, 2018). These aspects speak clearly for insufficient participation of the general public in a project of 'national importance'.

Briefly put, national level politicians (led by ex-prime minister, now (2019) the president of Serbia) made strategic decisions in respect to the BW project, hence, avoiding any kind of a public debate with a range of interested parties. Only the Urban Planning Institute (UPI), the urban planning office of the City of Belgrade, was involved in the process of plan making, due to its tight relationship with the political regime (Orlović Lovren *et al.*, 2016; Perić, 2016). Three distinctive irregularities, serving as a base for creating the plan of the BW area and its further implementation, illustrate inferior professional position and the citizens' response towards both the planners and decision-makers.

Figure 2: The model of the Belgrade Waterfront project



Source: [www.belgradewaterfront.com](http://www.belgradewaterfront.com)

First, in the regular spatial planning practice, the project elaboration follows the rules and parameters given in the plan. However, in the case of the BW, the international architectural office (SOM Architects) prepared the preliminary design project (without prior consultation with the professional organizations or with the citizens of Belgrade) to serve as a base for its elaboration into the urban plan by the UPI, as a necessary instrument for the future construction on site (Kovačević, 2014). This plan for the BW is in its nature totally different from the rest of the official Master Plan of Belgrade 2021 and, therefore, it was added *ex post* into it in the form of the amendments (Zeković *et al.*, 2018).

As an immediate response, the civil sector through its own initiative, ‘Don’t let Belgrade d(r)own!’ (*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd!*), raised its voice formulating objections to the proposed amendments (Čukić *et al.*, 2015). With a help of another collective, the Ministry of Space (*Ministarstvo prostora*), the citizens of Belgrade together with young experts discussed changes to the plan and filed over 3,000 complaints to proposed changes. The procedure of public insight that followed gathered over 200 people as well as representatives of the city authorities and professional institutions (Čukić *et al.*, 2015). Although the session lasted for more than six hours, all of the complaints were rejected, or only superficially taken into consideration and the Amendments to the Master Plan of Belgrade (OG CB 70/2014) were verified in September 2014. The citizens received a valuable lesson: existing democratic participatory tools proved to be only a simulation without any real effective power (Čukić and Perić, 2019).

Another irregularity of the plan for the BW area is its legal nature. Namely, the Master Plan of Belgrade, as the highest-tier urban plan, cannot be immediately implemented, but only through regulatory plans. This includes the rounds of public debates and approvals. Considering that such a procedure is extremely time consuming, in June 2014, a month before the ‘masterplan’ for the BW area was prepared, the Government made an official decision on creating the special spatial plan (Kovačević, 2014). Namely, the Plan for the Area of Specific Use is, according

to the planning law (OG RS 121/2012), created only 1) for non-urban areas of particular importance (i.e. mining and coal seams, flooding areas, natural resorts, etc.), and 2) in accordance to the higher-tier plans (i.e. regional or national spatial plans). Oddly, none of these conditions were fulfilled in respect to the BW area.

The civil sector (the Ministry of Space), acting again as the safeguard of the public interest in spatial planning decision-making, organized public debates among the prominent national experts in various domains (sociology, economy, public administration, spatial planning, etc.), with the final aim of addressing the decision-makers. However, these gatherings under the title “What is hidden beneath the surface of the ‘Belgrade Waterfront’”, running in October 2014 in parallel with the procedure of spatial plan making (Čukić *et al.*, 2015), gained the popularity among the general public. The ruling political structures, however, stayed ‘deaf’ to the citizens’ calls, thus, demonstrating an elementary ignorance of democratic decision-making (Čukić and Perić, 2019).

The culmination of public actions against the new Plan for the Area of Specific Use happened in November 2014 when the activists of the ‘Don’t let Belgrade d(r)own’ initiative (now officially formed into a NGO and much more numerable) opted for a different tactics to interrupt the process of legitimizing the BW project (Public debate, 2014). In addition to the regularly and officially sent complaints on the new spatial plan, in the performance called “Operation lifebelt” the activists used creative energy to ban the plan approval (Figure 3). Contrary to their expectations, and despite the noise, the interruption did not occur. Instead, the members of the planning commission continued their work, complaints were again rejected, and the session was deemed successful. The spatial plan for the BW was adopted in January 2015 (OG RS 7/2015) without any form of public debate on its quality (Čukić and Perić, 2019).

Figure 3: Performance “Operation lifebelt” during the public debate on the Spatial Plan for BW on November 5, 2014



Source: Kamerades (<https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/17/>)

The third peculiarity refers to the *Lex Specialis* – Act on Establishing the Public Interest and Special Procedures of Expropriation and the Issuance of Building Permit for the Project Belgrade Waterfront, proposed for adoption



in April 2015. In its essence, it is not obvious how the highly commercial BW project can preserve or be in the public interest. If the public interest is even prescribed by law, it is not clear how this works in practice as specific regulations on how to implement the law do not exist (Zeković *et al.*, 2018).

The activists of the ‘Don’t let Belgrade d(r)own’ warned of the core shortcoming of the law – it is not about the choice between the dilapidated private houses, on the one hand, and city growth through the BW project on the other. It is about expropriation for an exclusively commercial project that fulfills the needs of a private investor only. The public interest and the state itself are sidelined (Lex Specialis, 2015). In spite of the public complaints, the law was adopted (OG RS 34/2015), designating the start of the official construction on the BW area, which happened a half year later.

Finally, a detail that clearly explains the political power demonstrated towards the citizens is the demolition of the private property located within the boundary of the BW project. More precisely, during the night of April 26, 2016, the dilapidated building stock (though still used for living) was totally torn down. Communal officers were not reachable that night, so the affected citizens felt totally helpless (Whose city?, 2016). Citizens’ protests were held regularly in 2016 and 2017 (Figure 4). The court case is still not resolved.

*Figure 4: Protest walk organized by ‘Don’t let Belgrade d(r)own’ on June 25, 2016*



Source: Dušan Rajić (<https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/page/12/>)

## Discussion: from citizen power to tokenism?

Citizen participation is not a new instrument in Serbian planning practice. However, it was exercised to various extent in different phases of Serbian planning history due to a shift in societal, political, and economic circumstances. Participatory planning reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s under the socialist regime, while it currently suffers despite a democratic political system. At first sight, this is a paradox. Nevertheless, highly decentralized socialism of Yugoslavia allowed for participatory activities, though limited with the dominant ideology and politics. Today, legislation guarantees the involvement of citizens in planning issues, too, though in the context of a pluralist democracy. However, as the Serbian society is deemed to be ‘proto-democratic’ (Vujošević, 2010), there are no instruments for the operationalization of citizens’ demands, turning them into wishful thinking instead of a reaction to political decisions. The influence of politics on citizen engagement in spatial planning decision-making is inevitable. The basic characteristics of citizen participation in two mentioned phases of Serbian planning – observed through the lens of Arnstein’s ‘ladder’ – are briefly indicated below.

### *Participatory planning*

In addition to other (mainly economic) instruments of decentralized socialism, e.g. small artisan groups operated their private firms, workers’ community managed the public industry sector (Ramet, 1995), participatory planning was mainly practiced at the local level. The municipalities were considered socio-political communities, with the power of decision-making in any public action on its territory (Fisher, 1962). This has a direct consequence on the nature of planning process – the procedure of public insight enabled the citizens to discuss, debate, and submit remarks and comments to a plan’s proposal. Such a bottom-up participatory approach involving various types of individuals and groups, as well as the general public, sometimes even over-loaded the process of preparation, approval, and implementation of planning decisions (Čolić, 2009; Maričić *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, it should be stressed that hierarchical political structures controlled all kinds of associations and organizations, be these professional or civil sector (Liotta, 2001). Hardly any decision could have been made without the previous consent of the local and central governments (Nedović-Budić *et al.*, 2012).

Bearing strong political influence on the nature and impact of citizen participation in mind, two ‘ladder’ types can be assigned to Yugoslav participatory planning of the 1970s and 1980s. Both of them are characterized with the following: 1) spatial and environmental *information* was readily accessible for public scrutiny in the regional and local planning arena (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić, 2006); and 2) the legislation gave the citizens not only a right, but made them also obliged to participate in the planning process (Maričić *et al.*, 2018) – citizens acted as *consultants* and *advisors* to the expert committees and thus decision-makers. In the first ‘ladder’ type, the citizens’ visions, amendments, and proposals are in line with the dominant ideology and a broader societal interest. Hence, they became *partners* in the planning process, though the space for bargaining and negotiation was missing as both parties – citizens and decision-makers – strive for the fulfillment of the same (public) interest. In such a process, the *delegation of power* was strongly practiced as the local politicians were the ones to transfer the outcomes of local participatory process to the higher governmental levels. Another type of ‘ladder’ excludes the degrees of citizen power. Briefly, informed citizens entered the participatory planning process, their proposals were recognized, but there was no obligation for the planners to change the plan under discussion. As citizens had a legal obligation to provide the feedback on a planning proposal, such *de jure* participation served only to legitimize the proposed development solutions (Maričić *et al.*, 2018).

In a nutshell, do the previous lines describe pseudo-participation? It was not that obvious in the socialist regime, exempted from the plurality of interests. Namely, achieving the public interest was one of the main goals of socialist spatial and urban planning (Zukin, 1975; Vujošević and Nedović-Budić, 2006), thus overlapping with the beliefs, visions and norms of citizens. Finally, all actors involved had a high level of responsibility and skill in doing their specific tasks under given circumstances, thus jointly contributing to spatial development (Nedović-Budić and Cavrić, 2006; Perić and Miljuš, 2017).

## ***Market-led planning***

In 2000, the Serbian democratic government established the decentralization of power and administrative structure as a social and political priority (Vujošević, 2003). However, the share of responsibilities in the spatial planning domain in Serbia from national to local level is not really decentralized: as for the cities in inner Serbia, the spatial development is controlled by the planning committees whose members are also the members of the ruling political party (only in 10 out of 170 municipalities in Serbia the local authority is composed of politicians outside the ruling coalition). In the case of Belgrade's major spatial activities, the relevant ministries steer the spatial development (Zeković *et al.*, 2018). The only partners for the national government are private (foreign) investors. In an absence of regulatory instruments necessary for protecting transparency, limiting corruption, and preserving the national interests, both expert advice and strategic public deliberations are diminished (Maruna, 2015). In sum, citizens do not have enough will to take part in decision-making on spatial and urban development as they have little trust in their institutions' response (Maričić *et al.*, 2018).

Using Arnstein's metaphor, citizens in Serbia are today *manipulated*, as: there is no political will to introduce instruments for meaningful participation, while the notion of the public interest is lost (Maričić *et al.*, 2018); clientelism and paternalism dominate the planning practice (Vujošević *et al.*, 2012); and, civilian initiatives and associations are seen as relicts of the self-management system, one with a highly negative connotation among Serbian politicians (Vujović and Petrović, 2007). On the other hand, planners are also not in favor of citizen participation as they cannot find an appropriate position for themselves. Stretched between the political will, which they depend on as public officials, and private sector's demands that revolve around profit at the expense of any other benefit (e.g. public interest, quality of the proposal, environmental impact, feasibility prospects, etc.), experts have little understanding and patience for citizen activities. The recently introduced legal instrument of 'early public insight' (OG RS 145/2014) does not secure public participation. This participatory mechanism is not promoted enough among the general public, and the guidelines for its implementation are not well clarified. Hence, citizens' interest for the spatial and urban development issues is rather low (Čukić and Perić, 2019). Such an absence of citizen engagement in the planning process is actually an example of *de jure* public consultation. Citizens are not equal participants in the planning debate – while protecting their legal rights, they are mostly seen as an obstruction and a threat to the proposed planning solution supported by powerful interests. It is the superiors' vision that has to be materialized while participation only serves to provide legitimacy for the planning procedure (Maričić *et al.*, 2018).

In comparison to the period of participatory planning, when citizen participation was on the level of *pseudo-citizen power*, in the current market-led planning it is even worse – participation is considered a *pseudo-tokenism*. Briefly, the dominant political party manifests power in an almost one-party political system together with foreign investors capable of achieving their own private interest due to ad hoc spatial planning procedures. Such a symbiosis makes the experts unable to fight for their own position, while citizen participation is intentionally kept as the lowest priority.

## **In conclusion**

It seems that Serbia has never escaped out of this political vicious circle. The authoritarian regime provided advanced instruments for citizen participation to be exercised within the framework of the dominant ideology of the communist party. The current 'proto-democratic' system has no official limits for citizens – they are free to express their own opinion, but this is where the story ends. How can we strengthen citizen participation in a society that neglects citizen's rights?

As a first step, experts and citizens should understand and respect each other. Experiential knowledge of civil sector and professional skills based on instrumental rationality should be exchanged for the benefit of creating planning solutions that meet the interests of the majority – not only for the minor powerholders, as it is the case

today. Feedback between the public officials and citizenry gives insight into ideas, suggestions and remarks, and affects the creation of trust and mutual respect (Čukić and Perić, 2019). This civil-public synergy is essential for the transparency of the planning process – the process guided by the public-sector experts, with the civil sector as a control element, finally designating a shift towards the collaborative planning approach still declaratively promoted in Serbian planning policies (Lazarević Bajec, 2009; Perić and Miljuš, 2017).

Another recommendation is to strengthen the role of local authorities in cooperation with the civil sector (Čukić and Perić, 2019). The local level is a natural ‘place’ for collaboration with the civil sector: municipal representatives are aware of various groups, identities, and public amenities within the local borders. First, legal frameworks and strategic guidelines should support citizens’ initiatives in local development. In addition, financial institutional capacity including various means and resources secures public participation. Local strengthening, however, demands the independence of the local institutions in the hierarchical process of top-down decision-making in Serbia. This coincides with the legally prescribed process of administrative and political decentralization, which needs substantial improvement in order to enable effective public engagement (Zeković *et al.*, 2018).

After almost twenty years on a path towards representative democracy, the impact of citizen participation on the outcome of the spatial planning decision-making process is still low. Citizens usually show no interest to engage in public issues. Once interested, experts do not treat citizens’ input as a valid argument for the public discussion. The lack of professional support toward citizenry is a sign of the weak planners’ position in a highly controlled society, embodied in individual political figures. Therefore, a political monopoly over urban development must be avoided, which at the same time needs the differentiation of political from professional and administrative positions. As a result, citizens would be able to climb to the highest rung of the ladder – to be in control of spatial governance. Such civil-public partnerships are dependent upon a democratic social context, organized civil society, and a capacity to advocate the public interest. Thus, changes in planning instruments and governance mechanisms towards the implementation of civil sector practices in spatial policies depend on political, professional, and social will, as well as a readiness to change the decision-making system. Only when Serbia paves the way towards its democratic development, will public input be truly incorporated in the planning process.

However, the absence of the institutional framework and a lack of expert will to support citizen activities is not the only reason for an insufficient public involvement. As shown in the case of the BW project, a setting with weak institutions, inconsistent policies, and non-transparent procedures is a fertile ground for a wide range of manipulations that appear once international private investors enter the arena of spatial planning decision-making. In particular, urban megaprojects are seen as a tool for both the generation of extra-profit for private sector actors and an increase in corruption among the high-level public authorities (Grubbauer and Čamprag, 2019; Zeković *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, such a relationship has negative effects in spatial and social terms. Namely, gentrification, minimizing public space, and loss of local identity enabled through a large-scale unitary project, strongly 1) jeopardizes low-income and marginalized groups and, 2) diminishes the extent of public participation (Maričić *et al.*, 2018).

Urban megaprojects, as clear manifestations of neoliberalism, affect the decision-making process not only in transitional countries, but also in developed societies. Some lessons drawn from other CEE countries can help improve the citizen participation in Serbian planning practice (Cope, 2015; Stanilov, 2007; Hirt, 2005; Grubbauer and Čamprag, 2019). First, there is a clear need for a critical assessment of the discourse used in promoting such megaprojects. The nationalist and populist language, e.g. project of national priority, project that strengthens nationhood and national greatness, usually hides the political patronage and offers room for corruption, favoring local political elites and, thus, diminishing other social actors. Second, planners should be motivated to create innovative planning procedures (both formal and informal) for meaningful inclusion of various groups of stakeholders. Finally, the key concept is legitimacy, as it elucidates the definition of public interest through regulatory mechanisms. Therefore, the questioning of the official discourse centered on definitions and claims to

public interest is the first step, which should be followed by deconstructions of the regulatory order to analyze on which jurisdictional level, with what means, and with what purpose the public interest is defined.

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