

# Effects and Consequences of Authoritarian Urbanism: Large-Scale Waterfront Redevelopments in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Novi Sad

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## Abstract

This article highlights the (post) transitioning urban context as an emerging market for powerful international real-estate development companies, supported by an authoritarian planning trend aiming to secure foreign investments. Such a pattern is particularly noticeable in the implementation of the large-scale redevelopment project Belgrade Waterfront in the Serbian capital city, causing many controversies due to state-led regulatory interventions, investor-friendly decision-making, and a general lack of transparency. Although proactive but fragile civil society organizations in Serbia failed to influence the implementation dynamics of this megaproject, it inspired contestation by professional and civic organizations elsewhere, which finally led to significant disputes over similar developments. This study highlights similarities of this project to the initiatives emerging in other cities of the ex-Yugoslav countries: Zagreb Manhattan, announced to settle on the waterfronts of the Croatian capital, and more recently the Novi Sad Waterfront in the second largest Serbian city. The article concludes with a general overview of the effects and consequences characterizing the emerging trend in the production of space and highlights the rising role of the civil sector in more inclusive and democratic urban planning in ex-Yugoslav cities.

## Keywords

authoritarian urbanism; post-socialism; regulatory capitalism; urban megaprojects; urban politics; waterfront developments

## 1. Introduction

Although urban megaprojects (UMP) played a crucial role in the post-industrial development of cities (Grabher & Thiel, 2015; Orueta & Fainstein, 2008), this study approaches this phenomenon from a different

perspective. It departs from the entrepreneurial shift in urban governance that made such initiatives a profitable tool for high-performing private developers and reconfigured relations between public and private actors. In such cases, proponents of the large-scale initiatives resorted to extraordinary measures to circumvent democratic control and promote obscure political-economic regimes that led to a lack of transparency in their development and increasing criticism on democratic, economic, and social grounds (Murray, 2015; Olds, 2002; Orueta & Fainstein, 2008). The phenomenon demonstrated particular dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The reliance on UMPs played an essential role in attracting foreign capital (Appel & Orenstein, 2018), tourism, and new political identities (Čamprag, 2018; Graan, 2013; Kolbe, 2007) but also promoted investor-friendly decision-making along with the recent decline of democratic regime characteristics in the region (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

Against the backdrop of emerging investor-friendly urbanism that promotes the interests of the powerful elites and diminishes democratic regime characteristics, this article adopts a qualitative research approach to outline characteristics of this phenomenon and highlight its effects and consequences. One of the currently largest initiatives on waterfront transformation in the CEE context is the UMP Belgrade Waterfront (BW) in the Serbian capital. As a joint venture between the Republic of Serbia and the Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills, this ambitious riverfront redevelopment has garnered over the last few years considerable attention and sparked many national and regional public debates. Its implementation has also inspired a controversial trend of waterfront redevelopments emerging across the ex-Yugoslav region—the Zagreb Manhattan (ZM) was announced to settle on the waterfronts of the Croatian capital only a few years later, and more recently the Novi Sad Waterfront (NSW) in the second largest Serbian city. The study relies on a comprehensive literature review and examination of academic articles, reports, policy documents, and media sources for the period between 2012 and 2023 that provide insights into the selected UMPs. Through an in-depth analysis of these sources, the study aims to critically evaluate the extent to which these large-scale waterfront redevelopment projects reflect autocratic decision-making, investigate their implications on public welfare, social equity, and democratic governance, and explore the role of civil society organizations for more inclusive and democratic urban planning in the ex-Yugoslav region.

The article first sets up the main theoretical concepts and highlights the historical context of urban planning in the region. In the following sections, a detailed analysis of the BW project is provided to determine the characteristics of its implementation, followed by an analysis of the proposed waterfront developments in Zagreb and Novi Sad. The article further explores the responses and initiatives of professional and civil society organizations in the region, concluding with an overview of the effects and consequences of the authoritarian trend in the production of space in the ex-Yugoslavian context.

## 2. UMP and Authoritarian Urban Development

From Barcelona's transformative conversion of its coastal areas for the 1992 Olympics to London's successful regeneration of the Docklands, waterfront redevelopments have emerged as a key element in the urban development agenda of numerous European cities (Imrie & Thomas, 2023). By creating mixed-use spaces that blend residential, commercial, recreational, and cultural functions, these projects are characterized by high visibility, aiming to attract investment, tourism, and new residents, and thus drive urban growth and prosperity (Burton et al., 1996). Nevertheless, large-scale waterfront redevelopment in Europe presents a rich tapestry of successes, shortcomings, and debates (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019),

particularly after the financial crisis of 2008 that opened new perspectives in urban governance. This includes an apparent rise of a new regime in the contemporary political economy of governance, described as authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Gallo, 2021; Juego, 2018; Piletić, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2019). The regime generally embraces invoking economic necessity, favouring constitutional and legal mechanisms over democratic debate and participation, centralizing state powers at the expense of popular participation and other nodal points of governance, including mobilizing state apparatuses to suppress oppositional social forces. It also influences how urban development initiatives are governed—mostly through decoupling politics from political decision-making, by prioritizing the interests of powerful international investors, and with professionals acting in project implementation through hybrid public-private corporations with little democratic control.

CEE offers many possibilities to explore this new regime, particularly due to the collapse of the socialist system at a time when most of its countries showed different rates of transition to market-oriented democratic societies (Stanilov, 2007). Regulatory capitalism, as their common denominator, should be understood as complex dynamics between state government and big business, rather than the state being responsible for providing the framework for the market competition (Cope, 2015). For many development projects in the region, a deep discrepancy has already been described between the market-driven development rhetoric and the strong dependence on lucrative government regulation (Kinossian, 2012; Koch, 2014; Müller, 2011). Large-scale interventions in CEE often involve the construction of luxury housing developments and office spaces that primarily serve the purposes of capital gain and the interests of international capitalists (Cook, 2010). Far from traditional concepts of the local, such projects radically reshape urban space and demonstrate the power of international real estate companies, but also the “political weakness” (Temelová, 2007, p. 172) of city administrations to advocate for the public interest. There is also a general agreement in research about the crucial role of the nation-state in financing, legitimizing, and instrumentalizing UMPs in this context (Bruff & Tansel, 2019) that highlights “exceptionality” measures in planning and policy processes (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), facilitated by a system of contractual relationships between global companies and local businesses and governments (Lauermann, 2015; McNeill, 2015; Raco, 2014). What emerges from these reports is that in much of post-socialist Europe, the political elites have great potential for corruption and are often supported in their efforts by local authorities to legitimize and conceal such illegal plans by dressing such projects in nationalist and populist language (Koch & Valiyev, 2015).

The post-Yugoslav urban space represents a particularly valuable case to investigate the trends in focus. After decades of influence of socialist planning and modernist functionalism that fundamentally transcended national boundaries and local specificities, the successor states faced civil wars, economic challenges, and still present political instability. All of these circumstances have diverse implications for the planning and development of its cities, with the concept of authoritarian neoliberalism re-emerging in the way large-scale urban development projects are initiated, funded, and executed. The following section highlights the most prominent socio-spatial circumstances and their effects on urban planning in this context.

### 3. Political, Socio-Economic, and Spatial Development in the Post-Yugoslav Space

The outbreak of the civil war and many other subsequent events during the 1990s marked the end of an era of a mixed centrally planned self-governing economy in ex-Yugoslavia and rendered transitioning trajectories

for its successor states. Following the armed conflict (1991–1995), Croatia faced not only the socialist legacy and comprehensive social and economic redevelopment in a post-conflict context but also the challenges of establishing democracy, protecting human rights, and ensuring the return of refugees. Its national priorities were to rebuild and revitalize war-affected areas and later to transition from central planning to market-oriented development (Cavrić & Nedovic-Budic, 2007). Furthermore, the ruling political establishment managed to overcome its extremist nationalist legacy in the early 2000s, when it embraced a moderate conservative and pro-European orientation. Although the subsequent period was characterized by many problems such as unemployment, corruption, and the inefficiency of public administration, this was at the same time an era of rapid democratization, economic growth, and structural and social reforms (Puljiz et al., 2008).

Zagreb, as the capital city of a newly independent nation, was strongly influenced by the conditions in the country. The city consequently underwent significant urban planning developments, and after Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the focus of its urban planning initiatives gradually shifted towards sustainable development and adherence to EU standards. This implied priorities in infrastructure upgrades, environmental protection, and urban renewal to enhance the city's quality of life and international competitiveness. In 2014, the city administration finally started to explore the possibility of public use of locations along the Sava river by introducing various activities and attractions. However, contrary to significant socio-political changes on the national level, they failed to improve the generally low levels of citizen trust in democratic political institutions and especially the political parties (Zakošek, 2008), which also reflected on further development of the capital Zagreb and its riverbanks.

Contrary to Croatia, Serbia's transition towards a democratic society and market-based economy was much more complex. The early transitioning phase was marked by the UN-economic embargo (1992–1995), jointly imposed sanctions by the UN, the EU, and the United States (1998–2001), and finally the military conflict with NATO in 1999. The long-awaited political turn occurred only after the massive demonstrations following the elections in 2000. Withdrawal of the sanctions a year later marked the beginning of the next phase of economic transformation, which finally unlocked more substantial political and institutional transformation. However, in addition to poorly legitimized transition reforms and inherently unsustainable spatial development patterns (Vujošević et al., 2012), the issues of economic, ecological, and other restructuring got even more complex over time, making the long-awaited democratization failing to satisfy the expectations of the population (Vujošević et al., 2012). The return to the populist, centre-right political option in 2012 only pushed the country back to moderate nationalism (Lazea, 2015). Many authors agree that Serbia still hasn't departed from a post-socialist proto-democracy, with rudimentary developed institutions of representative democracy, civil society, and market economy (Petrović & Backović, 2019; Vujošević et al., 2012). In addition, by achieving the role of a central power figure in mid-2010, the current Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić gained near-monopoly control over the country's political institutions and media ("A Serbian election erodes democracy," 2017). His image as a "great leader" who "cares about the people and the state" (Vasović, 2022), secured his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) at least 800,000 members, making it the largest political party in Europe in 2020.

Resulting from a long period of political instability, the revitalization of run-down inner-city areas in the capital Belgrade was among many missed opportunities for urban development, particularly along the riverbanks (Vukmirović & Milanković, 2009). The transformation of its cityscape began when a new master plan advocated

for making the city more competitive with other European metropolises by exploiting its remarkable locational advantages (City of Belgrade, 2014; Vujović & Petrović, 2007). The second largest city in Serbia, Novi Sad, also suffered from the general political and economic situation, in addition to rapid centralization. The local government therefore recognized an opportunity for development by reaching out to the international sphere. After the city won the title of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) for 2022–2023, a new chance for international networking was recognized, including an opportunity to address some critical urban issues of an ethnically and culturally diverse city on the Danube corridor. The main idea was to define new goals toward inclusive and democratic development, which created a context for the establishment of a modern urban identity, revitalization of the city’s cultural heritage, (re)activation of its public spaces, and the development of civil cultural participation in Novi Sad (Stupar et al., 2023).

In specific socio-political settings of young (post) transitioning democracies in Croatia and Serbia, a new trend of autocratic planning unfolded more recently. Marked by the neoliberal development agenda and pushed through under the auspices of political elites, the large-scale waterfront regeneration initiatives emerging in the largest and most important urban centres of ex-Yugoslavia are selected as representative case studies (Table 1). The following section investigates the three controversial UMPs in more detail.

**Table 1.** The main features of the analysed case cities.

City	Belgrade, Serbia	Zagreb, Croatia	Novi Sad, Serbia
Area	359,9 km <sup>2</sup>	305,8 km <sup>2</sup>	106,2 km <sup>2</sup>
Population	1,383.875 (2023)	758,941 (2021)	306,702 (2022)
International river corridors	Danube, Sava	Sava	Danube
Political significance	National capital, the former federal capital	National capital	Capital of an autonomous province
Ruling political parties	SNS (centre-right) in coalition with the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS, centre-left)	Until 2021: Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ, centre-right) Since 2021: We Can!—Political Platform (left-wing, green political party)	The SNS/SDPS/SPO–SPS/JS–SVM coalition, led by the SNS (centre-right)
Local economy features	The economic hub of Serbia; national/regional financial centre; tourism destination; important information technology hub; contains a diverse industrial base, including sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and services	International trade and business centre and transport hub; service sector that includes finance, trade, and tourism; centre of production of electrical machines and devices, chemical, pharmaceutical, textile, and food industries	An economic and cultural hub; financial and insurance centre; home to major national energy companies; growing information technology centre

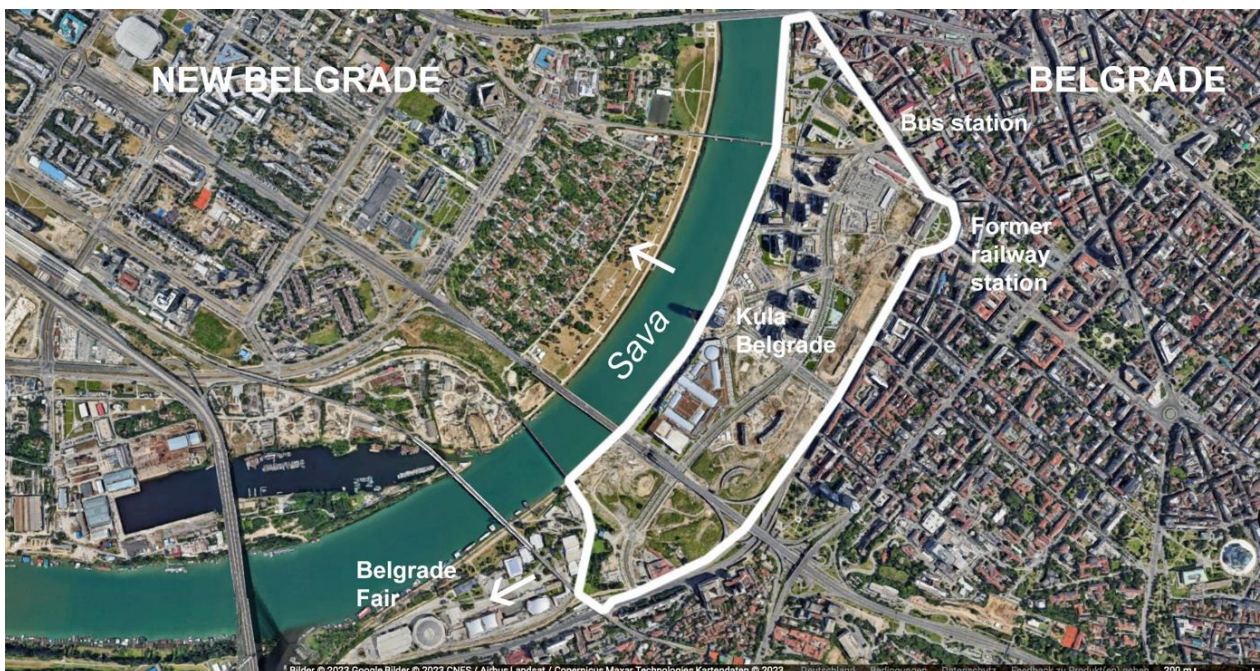


## 4. Authoritarian Implementation of Waterfront Regenerations in Serbia and Croatia

### 4.1. The BW Project: From Secret Dealing to National Interest

The flagship of waterfront urban renewal in Belgrade implied the conversion of around 90 hectares of derelict land (Figure 1), which the Belgrade Master Plan 2021 identified as one of the city's most valuable development areas (City of Belgrade, 2014, p. 109). The BW project was announced after the political shift following the 2012 elections when the SNS coalition gained a parliamentary majority. The vast area on the banks of Sava was covered by old railway tracks, characterized by a complex ownership structure with both public and private landowners (Figure 1). The initiative was seen as a flagship for revitalizing the national economy (Filipovic & El Baltaji, 2014) and received the greatest publicity ahead of the national parliamentary elections in March 2014 (Bakarec, 2015).

Originally, only six to eight years were estimated for the planned BW project, although the actual prerequisites for its implementation depended on extensive preparatory work with unforeseeable completion dates (Slavkovic, 2014). Despite these and other challenges that arose before the foundation stone was laid in 2015, the Serbian government assumed an autocratic role from the start, seizing decision-making power, excluding local authorities and expert opinion, and bypassing effective legal regulations. The background for this was the previously signed cooperation agreement between the governments of Serbia and the UAE (Government of Serbia, 2013), marked by the personal relationships of important players in both parties (Filipovic & El Baltaji, 2014). In the ensuing events, several controversial changes were made to the existing national and local legal framework to enable the project implementation.



**Figure 1.** The location for the BW project in Belgrade. Notes: The arrows show recently announced extensions of the project including the site of the Belgrade Fair. Figure generated from Google Images and CNES, with own additions.

With the updates of the Belgrade Master Plan 2021, the urban planning document with the greatest legal authority, some initial barriers to investor interest have been removed (City of Belgrade, 2014). At the same time, the Serbian government implemented changes to the existing national planning and construction law. The “specially designated areas” of national importance that require special regulation for the organization, development, and use of space (Republic of Serbia, 2014) have been redefined to include areas “for which the government has determined that they are of importance for the Republic of Serbia” (Republic of Serbia, 2014, para. 41). Based on these adjustments, BW was officially declared a specially designated area and a project of special importance for the national economic development (Republic of Serbia, 2014). The decree on the spatial plan for the special area that came into force in 2015 (Republic of Serbia, 2015) was entirely based on the investor’s proposed design, whose implementation had already begun before the plan was legally approved (Spalević, 2014). Furthermore, the national parliament also passed a special law granting BW the status of a public interest (Republic of Serbia, 2015).

Public concerns grew due to a series of conflicting information, such as the originally announced investment of three billion euros, which was significantly reduced to 150 million euros after the announcement of the contract (Sekularac, 2014). The opposition openly accused the ruling political establishment of corruption and claimed that the project aimed to hide a massive looting of city and state finances (BETA, 2016; Tanjug, 2015). Another contradiction concerns the master plan, which was developed with a general disregard for public participation and whose authorship remains unclear. The local and national associations of architects pointed out that the proposed plan “could have serious consequences for the development of Belgrade as a whole in terms of the principles of sustainability, identity, accessibility, competitiveness and contextuality” (Commission for Public Insight, 2014, n. 12.1). Furthermore, the joint venture agreement signed in April 2015, setting the rules for a newly formed public-private partnership, was not released publicly until five months later following public pressure. To date, information about the parties involved in the project and their ownership is incomplete since the investor was granted full anonymity by a decision of the Commission for the Protection of Competition.

Besides many public debates and other forms of contestation, the implementation of BW began in 2014—although residents of Savamala, where the project was to be built, continued to resist their eviction. When a group of masked people with excavators demolished their homes on a night in April 2016, forcibly evicting the residents, this incident finally triggered the first massive protests. The illegal demolitions were described as a “breakdown of the rule of law” (Ignatijević, 2017) to which neither the police, state officials nor state-controlled media responded.

Despite increasing challenges and public concerns, then Serbian Prime Minister Vučić continued to advocate for the implementation of the BW, describing it as “the future and the new image of Serbia” (Tanjug, 2016) that was paradoxically based on the mere construction of luxury real estate (Figure 2). Most of the high-rise buildings were characterized as oversized and unsuitable for the location (N1 Beograd, 2020; Serbian Academy of Architecture, 2015). In addition, BW does not envisage the construction of social or subsidized housing but is undoubtedly relying on home ownership and a rapid return on investments (Jovanović, 2020). The citizens’ initiative *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (NDMBGD; a play on words meaning: we won’t let Belgrade sink) particularly emphasized such issues, mobilizing the public through the involvement of the media, expert opinions, and other NGOs. They called for the cancellation of the plans for BW on legal grounds, as “the proposed draft violates the law and is contrary to the public interest” (Commission for Public Insight, 2014, n. 127). However,



**Figure 2.** View over the BW construction site.

most of their claims were rejected by the Commission for Public Insight, justifying the project by its previously obtained special legal status.

Apart from the legal changes and the lack of adequate responses to the increasing public criticism, the development strategy also relied on flagship projects and minor public facilities introduced during the second implementation phase. The new urban landmark, Kula Belgrade by renowned international architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, who designed the world's tallest building the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, intended to emphasize national modernization and progress. Furthermore, the unveiling of the controversial 23-meter-high monument to the central historical figure more recently was an opportunity for the political elite to emphasize national sentiment and ensure political support ("A monument to Stefan," 2021). The development trajectory of the project hasn't significantly changed since, even after a political coalition with the citizens' initiative NDMBGD won its first mandate in local and national parliaments (Stevanović, 2021), aiming to "oppose the autocratic regime also in the institutions" (NDMBGD, 2022). The public-private company in charge of BW implementation even announced in 2023 that it purchased the neighbouring land occupied by the Belgrade Fair complex with several listed buildings, which only created additional public concern (N1 Beograd, 2023).

#### **4.2. The ZM: Citizen's Victory Against Investor Urbanism?**

Not long after the BW project was announced, the municipal authorities in Zagreb also sought to revitalize the underutilized Sava River waterfront. Following a similar scenario, the then-mayor Milan Bandić (HDZ) signed in March 2019 a Memorandum of Understanding with the chairman of Eagle Hills, at that time already developing BW in neighbouring Serbia. Their plan in Zagreb was to turn 1.1 million square meters of city-owned land between the River Sava and the Večeslav Holjevac and Dubrovnik boulevards into a 500-million-euro UMP, dubbed "Zagreb Manhattan." The area is currently occupied by the Zagreb Fair—parts of which are protected as cultural monuments, the city Hippodrome, and a football complex (Figure 3). The project envisioned a mixed-use district with a blend of residential, commercial, cultural, and recreational facilities, with modern





**Figure 3.** The location for the proposed ZM project in Zagreb. Figure generated from Google Images and CNES, with own additions.

high-rise buildings, contemporary architectural landmarks, and leisure spaces to create a dynamic and visually striking new urban neighbourhood.

Advocates of the project from the major's cabinet emphasized its potential to stimulate economic growth, create job opportunities, and elevate Zagreb's international status as an attractive destination for business and tourism (Vladisavljevic, 2020). However, its implementation required conversion of the land via amendments to Zagreb's Master Plan, for which major Bandić strongly advocated, in addition to other investor-friendly conditions for project implementation. Some opponents argued that the project favoured private developers' interests over the well-being and needs of local communities, bringing upon charges of corruption and illegality (Babić, 2020). This was inspired by some large-scale public spending of the major's cabinet that previously came under scrutiny (Šimić Banović, 2019), particularly after the disputed Memorandum of Understanding was finally published in September 2019. After months of pressure from independent media and opposition councillors, a document whose contents were kept secret by the city leaders revealed that the allegedly non-binding memorandum indeed contained some binding articles (Nezirović, 2020). In addition, the document also provided some risk minimizations for the investor, for instance, in case the project failed the investor could "sue the City of Zagreb...for compensation for all costs Eagle Hills have incurred in preparing the project" (Vladisavljevic, 2020).

As a result of many speculations, members of national professional associations argued that democratic oversight of the project was not adequate (Vladisavljevic, 2019). According to them, ZM "would destroy the location of the Hippodrome and the Zagreb Fair" (Vladisavljevic, 2019) and could irreparably damage the capital's delicate urban fabric (Prtorić, 2019), including green spaces (Vladisavljevic, 2019). Mayor Bandić's strong advocacy for the gleaming ZM was characterized as another opportunity for speculation (Prtorić,

2019). Finally, professional associations also called for the postponement of the decision on amendments to Zagreb's Master Plan due to several procedural errors, non-compliance with democratic procedures, and an absence of public discussions about the project. Several civil organizations and NGOs, such as Right to the City, Green Action, Zagreb is Calling You, and Siget, finally organized the protest against changes to the Master Plan that would enable the construction of the "Zagreb Waterfront"—as the activists called it to emphasize its striking resemblance with the UMP in Serbia (Indikator, 2019).

The changes to the plan were finally dropped after a dramatic session of the assembly and increasing public pressure (Croatiaweek, 2020). Although the ZM implementation became uncertain following these events (Nezirović, 2020), mayor Bandić repeated that he would not give up on the plan (Vladislavljevic, 2020) and continued to highlight the economic potential of the project. However, critics further emphasized the need for a more participatory and transparent approach to urban planning, ensuring that the outcomes align with the broader interests and aspirations of the city's residents. The ZM initiative finally became obsolete after the political shift in the city administration of Zagreb, when the citizens' associations took over the credit for stopping the project. They reminded the public that the initiative would have privatized a large area of the city for the benefit of a private company, which would be to the detriment of the entire community (Janković, 2022).

#### 4.3. The NSW: Citizens Against the BW Scenario

The latest of the three UMPs in focus was announced in 2019 when the then-mayor of Novi Sad Miloš Vučević (SNS) presented a capital investment of half a billion euros (Komarčević, 2020). The NSW project envisaged an expansion of the city along the left Danube coast, in the area of the old shipyard and the navy barracks, amid the green areas of Kamenička Ada and Šodroš (Figure 4)—previously long considered for declaration as a nature reserve (Ranocchiar, 2022).



**Figure 4.** The location for the proposed NSW project in Novi Sad. Figure generated from Google Maxar Technologies and CNES, with own additions.



The proponents of the project viewed it as a crucial opportunity for the urban development of Novi Sad through the revitalization of its underutilized land, which should enhance the city's economic potential and improve the overall urban landscape (Janković, 2022; Ranocchiari, 2022). They anticipate that its development will attract tourists and investors, stimulating job creation and economic growth. However, considering that the area at the same time holds crucial importance for the preservation of the ecosystem and defence against floods, civic associations and activists argued that NSW is a speculative move that will destroy one of the last green areas of the capital of Vojvodina (Ranocchiari, 2022). The concerns on the issues of its transparency and public participation were expressed, due to a lack of adequate involvement of local communities and civil society organizations, and by limiting their ability to influence the project's design and impact (Komarčević, 2020). Finally, the activists also highlighted that behind the alleged decentralization of the urban centre, investors are allowed to expand even further through direct negotiations with the city (Krstić, 2022).

The project was also criticized by the professional public, which in 2014 submitted nearly 2,000 objections to the City Assembly before the amendment of the Master Plan (Komarčević, 2020). According to the assessment of the Association of Architects of Novi Sad, the changes in the Master Plan to enable the implementation of the NSW project “did not meet the necessary expectations” (Krstić, 2022), suggesting that it should be completely revised (Krstić, 2022; Ranocchiari, 2022). However, the Institute for Urbanism of the City of Novi Sad, in charge of its drafting, justified the plan with the predictions of rapid urban population growth in the following years, characterizing it as “adaptable, inclusive and changeable,” and “based on sustainable development” (Ranocchiari, 2022). After the City's Planning Commission in a secret session rejected almost all of the 12,000 objections to the plan, local organizations and citizens' associations openly invited citizens to demonstrations. During the session when the new plan was adopted by a large majority of city councillors, the situation escalated and the protesters clashed with the police (Janković, 2022). Ironically, just one day after the incident, the organizers of the ECoC 2022 invited the public to the Danube Sea program, which aims to raise citizens' awareness of environmental problems by “connecting art and ecology” (Subašić, 2022).

Despite the contestations, the changes were adopted in 2022, enabling the implementation of a new neighbourhood with luxurious residential high-rise, commercial spaces, and recreational facilities (Figure 5). To realize the project, the Novi Sad company Uni-Galens became the holder of the right to use land by purchasing the old shipyard at this location (Simeunović Simeun, 2022). Furthermore, the plan also foresees an extensive reconstruction of the city's road network, including the construction of a new bridge to connect the city centre with a new ring road. The construction of the bridge began after the ratification of an agreement between Serbia and China in 2020, according to which the project should be financed and implemented by the Chinese company CRBC (eKapija, 2020). Despite unresolved legal controversies, the excavators of the company started to prepare the ground, although the investor still did not obtain building permission. The construction works were temporarily stopped by the group of organized protestors, while the authorities later described the incident as a ‘procedural error’ that happened before the adoption of the Master Plan (Ranocchiari, 2022).

Although the implementation of NSW is currently put on hold and remains uncertain, it already shows a strong resemblance to the authoritarian scenario observed in Belgrade—this time, however, orchestrated by the investments from China that hold a strong influence on the Serbian authorities. An evidence of the



**Figure 5.** Visualisation of the NSW project. Source: VIA Inženjering d.o.o. (2019, p. 2).

government coupling with the investor is an incident when the public company Waters of Vojvodina based in Novi Sad suddenly changed its opinion on the plan from negative to positive, after an unexpected change in its management structure (Ranocchiaro, 2022; Simeunović Simeun, 2022). Another incident occurred when the leading research institution in Serbia, Jaroslav Černi, gave a positive opinion on the plan—only after changes in its ownership structure (Ranocchiaro, 2022).

## 5. Autocratic Urbanism: A Regional Trend or a Test for Young Democracies?

The large-scale waterfront redevelopment initiatives in the analysed cities demonstrate some remarkable similarities (Table 2). Evident is a strong reliance of the national political elites on foreign investments through mobilizing UMPs with outstanding visibility and great transformative potential. Mobilization of flagships and prominent architecture thereby aims to create spectacular imagery and ensure public acceptance, which ultimately serves to streamline public debates and approval processes (Andersen & Røe, 2016). In Belgrade, this trend advanced towards new forms of public-private partnerships that showcase the confluence of state-led regulatory intervention and neoliberal principles, emphasizing the attraction of foreign investment and stimulation of economic growth (Bialuschewski, 2018). However, the lack of transparency, limited public consultation, and a top-down approach classify this project as an embodiment of extreme autocratic decision-making (Basta & Petrović, 2019; Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2018). Similar patterns could be observed in other cases as well. The ZM project promises to create an iconic skyline of an emerging global city, hoping to attract international investments and establish Zagreb as a significant European city—only to demonstrate comparable characteristics of decision-making driven by autocratic neoliberalism that prioritizes private interests (see Šimić Banović, 2019). Following the disputations against BW, and even after the annulment of the ZM project due to significant public contestations, the emerging NSW initiative in the second-largest Serbian city mirrors the same planning pattern (Table 2).



**Table 2.** The main characteristics of the analysed waterfront redevelopments.

Project title	BW	ZM	NSW
Announced (year)	2012	2019	2020
Investor	Republic of Serbia in partnership with Eagle Hills, a real estate investment and development company headquartered in Abu Dhabi (UAE) with a global reach. Known for its upscale projects, Eagle Hills has established a presence in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The company specializes in diverse developments, including luxury residences, hotels, and mixed-use communities.	City of Zagreb in partnership with Eagle Hills, the same international company that implements the UMP in Belgrade.	City of Novi Sad in partnership with the local construction company Uni-Galens. Republic of Serbia in partnership with the Chinese company CRBC China Road and Bridge Corporation, a major state-owned construction and engineering company based in Beijing (China). CRBC is a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company, one of the largest engineering and construction companies globally.
Project description	Shopping mall, residential buildings, and office space.	Residential buildings, office space, shopping centres, and catering facilities	Up to 20 residential-commercial buildings, 2,299 residential units, and a dock for boats
Area/surface	90 hectares of land; announced expansion to the neighbouring land About one million square meters, with ca. 6,000 apartments	110 hectares of land About one million square metres	21 hectares of land 39.600 square meters
The total value of the project	Originally estimated at 3.5 billion euros	Up to 500 million euros	About 400 million euros
Public benefits	Promenades, new streets and public spaces, playgrounds, and parks. More recently a museum was announced, as well as a children's theatre and an international school.	Promenades, new streets, and public spaces.	Promenades, new streets, and public spaces.
Proponents	President of the Republic, national government	Mayor, local government	Mayor, local government, national government
Government interventions	Changes to the planning documents, special legal status, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, illegal demolitions, limited public consultation	Intended changes to the planning documents, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, limited public consultation	Changes to the planning documents, secret dealing, prioritization of investors' interests, illegal demolitions, limited public consultation

**Table 2. (Cont.)** The main characteristics of the analysed waterfront redevelopments.

Project title	BW	ZM	NSW
Opponents	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media	Civic sector, professional associations, independent media
Opponents' activities	Public debates, protests, political engagement	Public debates, protests	Public debates, protests
Current status	Under implementation since 2015. In 2023 the company bought the land of the neighbouring Belgrade Fair.	Annulled in 2020	Uncertain

Another major observation considers the response of local and national civil and expert organizations. Contrary to contestations in Belgrade that resulted from the prioritization of the interests of private investors and the ruling elite over the needs and aspirations of local communities, the BW project has been smoothly implemented since 2015. The apparent inability of the young civil sector in Serbia to influence the project's implementation became later a warning sign and an incentive for the citizens and experts from the region to take a more active part in urban planning and development. While proponents of the ZM project kept on highlighting its enormous economic potential, civic organizations from Zagreb actively questioned the transparency and inclusivity of the decision-making process, establishing regional exchange channels, and openly drawing parallels with the BW project from the same developer (Indikator, 2019). More recently, the alleged transformation of the waterfront area of Novi Sad to boost economic development and drive modernization was also criticized in its pursuit of neoliberal urban growth over the lack of transparency, public participation, and meaningful exchange with civil society organizations. As a result, although the implementation of the BW project follows stable dynamics, the fates of similar initiatives in Zagreb or Novi Sad remain highly uncertain.

Finally, UMPs to revitalize waterfront areas in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Zagreb are strongly characterized by the involvement of powerful international investors, coupled with a strong political lead that promotes a general lack of transparency and meaningful public participation. The projects commonly rely on market-oriented urban development and a rhetoric of necessary foreign investments to stimulate economic growth but at the expense of social and environmental considerations, and with critical impacts on social equity, cultural heritage, and natural environment. As a result, they are increasingly perceived as a tool for providing benefits to political and economic elites at the expense of public interest. The restriction of citizens' influence on planning decisions further leads to corruption charges and other public concerns that challenge already low levels of citizen trust in democratic political institutions in the countries of the region.

## 6. Conclusions

The large-scale waterfront redevelopment initiatives in Serbia and Croatia commonly demonstrate a trend where authoritarian governance and neoliberal economic policies converge to drive UMPs that raise concerns about transparency, inclusivity, sustainability, and the prioritization of private interests over public welfare. These projects have implications on social justice, cohesion, and community identity, while their emphasis on modernization and market-driven development overlooks the importance of conserving unique

locational assets. Their implementation as private-public partnerships recalls a scheme in which politicians demonstrate reliance on their privileges to expropriate public resources, leaving behind risks and significant debts (Horvat, 2017; Šimić Banović, 2019). In this respect, analysed initiatives show similarities to other autocratic development initiatives in the region—in particular the revamp of the North Macedonian capital Skopje by the controversial UMP Skopje 2014. This massive urban redevelopment was entirely conceived, funded, and implemented by the national government, contrary to the public criticism that emphasized a general lack of transparency, participation, and legally deficient procedures, in addition to the political elites being accused of overspending public funds and even engaging in money laundering (Čamprag, 2018). However, in addition to the obvious inability of political elites in the region to advocate for the public interest, an equally concerning phenomenon is the rising power of international real estate development companies to tailor the conditions for government support, minimize risks, and gain contractual benefits to their own goals. As a result, national governments in the region desperately relying on neoliberal economic policies due to their urgent need for foreign capital made the fragile ex-Yugoslavian urban landscape a new playground for powerful real estate developers. Furthermore, the pursuit of non-transparent, large-scale waterfront regenerations with utmost visibility in capital cities of the region only threatens to domesticate extreme manifestation forms of autocratic urbanism and further erode democratic accountability and governance of public goods and the commons.

Despite some striking similarities in the way large-scale waterfront regeneration initiatives have been conceived and promoted across the region, the fact that they have in some cases failed to be implemented calls for further investigation into this phenomenon. Considering that contradictory neoliberal urban development policies are on the rise globally, citizens have gradually become aware of its enormous negative effects on existing environmental, social, and cultural values, leading to less just and equitable outcomes. An evident increase in civic activism against the harmful outcomes of such developments is also apparent in the ex-Yugoslavian region. The emerging contestations oppose a long legacy of various types of plunder legalized or justified in the countries of the region through a variety of arrangements, in which the public interest was commonly not protected (Horvat, 2017). Reduction of public spaces, privatization of public goods, and aggravation of social inequalities in the cities of the region led a variety of groups and individuals to take action toward more inclusive and just planning outcomes. The more recent scenarios when it comes to investor-friendly redevelopments reveal new dynamics of civic engagement and regional networking. Therefore, despite the legacy of autocratic planning that still challenges the fragile young democracies of ex-Yugoslavian countries, the ongoing consolidation of civil society promises an alternative for the more effective representation of public interest in such endeavours.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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