The impact of post-socialism on informal settlements in Belgrade

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ABSTRACT

After the fall of communism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in 1989 the countries that had been under socialist rule underwent a process of political, economical and social reforms and changes. These changes also had a major impact on the process of urban planning; creating a disruption in previously held planning ideas and patterns and causing a brake with the former planning system. In this context new approaches to planning arose, as did new challenges and problems, such as the phenomenon of informal and unplanned settlements. This study seeks to give some answers to the origins and causes of the development of informal settlements in Belgrade as well as inquiring how planning authorities are currently dealing with the problem in light of the large-scale new construction project Belgrade Waterfront. The data was collected using an inductive, qualitative approach through interviews, observations and by examining secondary sources on the topic. The results indicate a city still struggling with finding a functional planning system, scarred by wars, sanctions and an ongoing refugee crisis and with a government that too often prioritizes grand building projects over meeting the needs of its citizens.

Keywords: Belgrade, post-socialism, informal settlement, illegal construction, Belgrade Waterfront

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the fall of socialism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in 1989 the countries that had been under socialist rule underwent a series of political, economical and social reforms and changes. These changes had a major impact on the process of urban planning – creating a disruption in previously held planning ideas and patterns and causing a brake with the former planning system (see e.g. Tsenkova & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Stanilov, 2007). While the communist era was marked by standardized housing blocks, privatizations and the decreased power of the state apparatus to carry out large-scale building projects changed the planning paradigm.

In the case of Belgrade one can see many of the typical features of a once communist city such as large areas of concrete housing blocks and abandoned industrial land – but there are also features that are fairly atypical for a post-socialist city. The very particular and unique circumstances Belgrade – as the capital of Yugoslavia – found itself in during the 1990s had a considerable impact on the urban development of the city. While Belgrade went through many of the same processes that generally characterize post-socialist transition (democratization, decentralization, privatization and so on) it also diverges from the norm in some important ways. Despite Yugoslavia’s favorable position at the time of the upheavals of 1989, subsequent civil wars, bombings, economic sanctions and eventual disintegration of the country itself had a negative effect on the development of urban planning. During this period illegal construction boomed due to general disorder in society and an ineffective state apparatus. What had been an existing but fairly uncommon phenomenon during communism became the norm, especially on the outskirts of the city where former villages became overgrown and where fields were illegally divided into plots and sold off. At the height of lawlessness and disorder in the 1990s building permits were difficult and expensive to get, plans were either not made or not followed and with the massive influx of refugees of the civil wars in Yugoslavia illegal construction and unplanned urban growth became unavoidable.

The protests and eventual overthrow of incumbent president Slobodan Milošević on 5 October 2000 was considered the end of an era – the wars and sanctions that had marked the 1990s had come to an end. It also in effect marked the end of state socialism which had had a considerable residual effect on society during Milošević’s reign. In the years following there was a boom in the private sector, including in privately funded construction, but despite this change very little was done about the problem of illegal construction and unplanned urban growth. Existing urban plans and laws regarding construction remained largely irrelevant for someone building a new house. New laws and regulations have been introduced, there have been several pushes for legalization from the government, new urban plans were made for previously unplanned settlements and yet very little substantial change has taken place. A lack of funds can certainly be a reasonable explanation and a lack of adequate mechanisms to implement plans and enforce existing planning regulations is certainly plausible.

In this context, however, it might be worth asking the question why the government of Serbia is heading one of the biggest construction projects in Europe (Telegraf, 2015). The project, named Belgrade Waterfront (Beograd na vodi in Serbian) is meant to reinvent the city’s image by converting former industrial land along the river Sava in the center of the city
into a new residential and commercial district with modern high-rise buildings, shopping malls and luxury apartment complexes. The new project has been widely discussed (and often protested) in Serbia and it is the most controversial and talked about subject in the field of urban planning in the country today. I believe it is important to tie these two strands of urban development in Belgrade together – on the one hand there is a major problem of illegal construction and unplanned urban growth which is either not dealt with or dealt with insufficiently. On the other hand the nation’s government, governing over a country that is struggling economically, is heading one of the largest construction projects in Europe and has ensured a speedy implementation of the plans (Večernje Novosti, 2015; Blic, 2015; Interview 3).

If such a large scale, important and also controversial project can be approved and implemented so rapidly by the government and if there has not been any lack of funds for the infrastructure needed for the new area – why is that not the case with informal settlements? What is, indeed, the real reason for the ongoing problem with illegal construction and unplanned urban growth in Belgrade?

This study will seek to investigate and give some clarification on this process of transition from (or disruption of) the socialist-era planning model and how it gave rise to the phenomenon of informal settlements in the city of Belgrade, from the perspective of both planning officials, researchers and local residents.

The main research questions are:

- In light of the considerable investments made in the Belgrade Waterfront project, how much of the focus of planning authorities is placed on dealing with the problem of informality?
- What processes have led to or enabled the formation of informal settlements in Belgrade?
- How are city authorities and other actors involved in shaping the ideas and plans for the city approaching this issue? How is it explained and how is it dealt with?

2. METHOD

In order to give insight into the research questions and to understand how the post-socialist process of transition has given rise to informal or unplanned settlements in the particular context of Belgrade, an inductive approach was chosen. In other words, no particular theory was used in order to interpret the results but conclusions were drawn from analyzing the gathered first-hand material as well as literature previously written on the subject. This approach was chosen to avoid preconceptions that can distort or leave out important findings, and to allow dominant patterns and themes to emerge from the raw data which can then be analyzed further (Thomas, 2006).

According to Thomas (2006) the purposes of using an inductive approach in evaluating qualitative data are to:
In order to collect the qualitative data necessary for the study I decided to conduct a number of interviews and to choose a particular informal settlement to use as the primary study object. The idea was to gather various perspectives on the development of informal settlements and illegal construction – partly from planning officials and professionals who deal with the issue but also from the local residents. The period for conducting the interviews and all the field work necessary was, for practical reasons, limited to ten days (November 27 – December 6).

Before arriving in Belgrade I sent e-mails to a number of individuals from various public and private institutions and organizations, such as the Secretariat for Urban Planning and Construction, the Ministry of Construction and Urbanism, the Urban Development Program, the Faculty of Architecture and the Institute of Urbanism. Since I chose the area of Sremčica in the municipality of Čukarica I also contacted the municipality and a local non-governmental organization by the name “Naša Sremčica” (“Our Sremčica”). The area of Sremčica (appendix 2, figure 2) was chosen since it was familiar to me beforehand and since I had gotten the impression from preparatory research that it would be a good example of an unplanned settlement. Unlike some other areas in Belgrade – notably Kaluđerica (see e.g. Tsenkova et al, 2009; Stokić, 2014; Marković, 2010; Večernje Novosti, 2014) – Sremčica has arguably not been given much attention for its unplanned and expansive growth, which gave the incentive for further research.

The choice of informants can therefore be regarded as purposive (Bryman, 2008, p. 375) as it was done to highlight the research questions. Due to the limited time frame of the field work, the interviews that were conducted also depended largely on the various individuals and institutions I contacted. So even though the sampling was done in a purposive manner, it did also to some extent depend on convenience and availability (Bryman, 2008, p. 415). The interviews done at the Faculty of Architecture were initially made possible by an acquaintance who is studying architecture at the faculty. The professor I was supposed to interview, however, notified me that she did not have time and so she referred me to the two informants whose responses I used for my analysis.

The responses from the other institutions and organizations that I contacted were varied. Some answered fairly quickly, before I arrived in Belgrade, while some others either did not answer or simply referred me elsewhere. All of the informants from the Institute of Urbanism, the municipality of Čukarica and the organization of Naša Sremčica answered in good time and where all very helpful. These interviews lasted for around one and a half to over two hours and were all done in the offices of the respondents. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way with a basic interview guide (see appendix 1; Bryman, 2008, p. 436-437) which allowed for more flexibility in the topics discussed as it was important to capture the unique point of view of each respondent. The same interview guide was used for all interviews, although the questions were specified for the particular respondent. The
municipality, for example, is not involved in the general planning process in the city of Belgrade and so questions related to the Belgrade Waterfront project were not, in my view, as relevant to ask that particular respondent. Likewise, for the organization *Naša Sremčica* the questions were more focused on the work of the organization, the needs of the residents in the area, local problems and how the planning authorities are functioning from a local perspective.

Although it is often recommended to record interviews and transcribe the material which is then analyzed (Bryman, 2008, p. 436), none of the interviews were recorded. One reason was the length of the interviews, which were all quite long and would take a long time to transcribe. The second reason was the fact that most of the informants shared offices with others which I believe created too much background noise for the conversation to be properly recorded. The third one was that some informants felt uncomfortable being recorded and preferred not to be. During all interviews regular notes were taken simultaneously as the conversations were ongoing, which made it possible to capture some quotes and other significant information which I then transcribed and analyzed (Thomas, 2006). Keeping in mind the limited time frame of the study I believe enough relevant material was gathered by taking notes, although it is worth considering and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. Perhaps for a more extensive study on this subject it would be better to record the conversations lest some important piece of information is forgotten or goes unrecorded.

Three of the institutions or organizations that I had contacted before the beginning of the field study did not end up either responding or making an appointment for an interview; these were the Urban Development Program, the Ministry of Construction and Urbanism and the Secretariat for Urban Planning and Construction. While in Belgrade, I visited the Secretariat of Urban Planning but was unable to make an appointment. Due to the time limit I then decided not to persist in my attempts at finding informants at the Secretariat or the city administration in general anymore. By chance, one of the interviews that I conducted at the Faculty of Architecture was with an official at the Office of the Director of City Planning so I would argue that I still included the perspective of the city’s planning authorities, albeit in a more limited form than I had intended.

It should be noted that, during the period I visited Belgrade for the field work a process of legalization of previously illegal or unregistered buildings had begun. In recent years there have been several attempts to deal with the problem of illegal construction, and this year there has been a new push for legalization from the government (see e.g. Blic, 2014; Ministry of Urbanism, 2016; Informer, 2015; Politika, 2015). So while the subject of this study is very current and relevant to Serbia at the moment it also meant that the planning authorities were very busy. This might have been at least one of the reasons I did not get any response or the opportunity to interview anyone from these institutions.

The final interviews were conducted in the following order:

- 1. Interview with an architect and urban planner at the municipality of Čukarica.
- 2. Interview with a representative of *Naša Sremčica*.
- 3. Interview with an architect at the Institute of Urbanism in Belgrade.
4. Interview with a researcher at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade.

5. Interview with a researcher and official at the Office of the Director of City Planning.

In order to get a clearer picture of Sremčica I decided to visit the area and walked from the neighborhood Gorica at the northern end, to a nearby neighborhood with a number of relatively recent, possibly illegally built houses. I then travelled by bus along the main road Beogradska and exited a few stops down the road at the broadest part of the settlement – where the distance from one end to the other is around two kilometers. I walked down the street Obrenovačka and a number of side streets and unnamed streets to the end of the settlement and then back to the main road (Figure 3, part 1). I later continued along the main road until I came to the street Gnjionska which I followed down to the local Orthodox Christian parish church and around to the neighborhood located south of the church (Figure 3, part 2). Ultimately I went to the very end of Sremčica and the area located on the settlement’s southernmost side (Figure 3, part 3).

The total amount of time spent in Sremčica was around four hours, not including the journey to and from central Belgrade. Before visiting the area I had some idea about which parts I wanted to visit. I wanted to visit the area of Gorica and a few streets that I was told contained a large number of illegal houses. I then wanted to walk around in the part of the settlement where there was a higher concentration of buildings and finally the southern part which, I believed, would give a relative cross section of the entire area.

It is important to note that the visit, and the entire field study, took place in December so the weather conditions meant that there was a limit to the time that could be spent making the observation and photographing in the area. Due to the process of legalization mentioned earlier and due to the nature of the settlement as largely unplanned with a considerable number of illegal buildings, it is very likely that I arose some suspicion while walking around and occasionally taking pictures. Since people, especially in the smaller streets, most likely do not see a great deal of thoroughfare I do think it might have seemed strange to them. These reasons are also why I decided not to interview anyone onsite, since I believe it would have been interpreted as intrusive and arisen the suspicion of the locals which in turn would not have yielded any good results and would also be ethically questionable. I would suggest that, for the scope of this study, enough information about the local area and the problems facing the residents were gathered by the interview with the organization Naša Sremčica and by personal observations of the area. For further studies on this subject, however, it would probably be beneficial to conduct more interviews with locals to get their perspective without an intermediary.

2.1. Literature and material

As a theoretical background to the study I have studied material previously written on the subject of post-socialist transition, primarily that which is related to housing and spatial changes in urban areas. Some examples of such books, essays or articles include the books *The Post-Socialist City* and *The Urban Mosaic of Post-Socialist Europe* both of which contain chapters from different authors discussing both general trends as well as the case of Belgrade
and Serbia/Yugoslavia in particular.
Other articles include *Illegal construction in Belgrade and the prospects for urban development planning*, discussing illegal planning and building in Belgrade in the 1990s and *Make No Little Plan: Modernist Projects and Spontaneous Growth in Belgrade, 1945-1967* which discusses the roots of informal settlements in the post-war era under communism. Other materials used for the study were taken primarily from various Serbian and United Nations government organs and from news articles from online news sources. The maps used were made with the help of Google Earth or Google Maps and all images are self-made.

2.2. Acronyms and terms

**IDP**: Internally displaced person

**Unplanned or informal settlement**: used interchangeably to refer to areas that have grown up largely or wholly without urban plans.

3. DISPOSITION

In section four I will discuss the term post-socialist transition and give a general background to this process. In the following section, there will be a discussion on the major stages of development of urban planning in Belgrade divided up into three parts; the early planning period after World War II, the era of planning from around 1965 and 1989 which was marked by various decentralizing reforms and finally the era during the civil wars and economic sanctions in the 1990s. In section six there will be a discussion on the origins and spread of informal settlements in the city from the 1960s to the 1990s.

In section seven and eight the results from the field study in Belgrade will be presented and discussed from both the perspective of planners and officials and from the local perspective. Finally there will be a concluding discussion of the results in section nine.

4. POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITION

In order to make an analysis of how the overall economic, political and social transition from the previous socialist system to the current post-socialist one gave rise to the phenomenon of informal settlements it is important to first define what is meant by the term *transition*. Even though the term itself implies that there has been a move away from something to something else, it can often be difficult to say what formerly socialist countries in general, or Serbia in particular, have moved towards (Gligorijević, 2012, Tsenkova, 2014; Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006). One can arguably state that there has been a brake with the system that used to exist and without deeper analysis of the term for the sake of this study – *transition* will be used to describe this change.

Despite the often difficult task of defining what former socialist countries have transitioned to, there are some basic elements that are generally held in common. The first one is a political transition from a one-party communist state to a more democratized system with
multiple parties. The second one is an economic transition from a more or less centrally planned economy to a market based economy. The third one is an administrative and institutional transition from a centralized to a more decentralized system of governance (Tsenkova, 2014; Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006).

In order to see how these various areas of change have an impact on planning policies it is useful to start with some basic assumptions. The political transition from a centralized, one-party state to a democratized system means that there will be less homogenous expression of political will which will arguably make it more difficult to, for example, muster the political will necessary for grand construction projects (Hirt, 2013). Similarly, as the state seizes to be the main – or only – landowner it is more difficult to make unilateral decisions in regards to planning as private interests and land prices now have to be taken into consideration (Ibid).

Together with these political changes, the economic changes from a centralized, planned economy will likewise leave the state with less means to carry through large-scale projects and plans and it also leaves way for private actors to enter the scene more than previously (Tsenkova, 2014; Gligorijević, 2012; Interview 1). Finally, the decentralization of governance and the changing role of institutions (such as planning institutions) will lead to a different approach to both the making of plans and the implementation of plans (Tsenkova, 2014). In regards to urban planning policies and practices it then becomes important to ask: how did urban planning function under communism and what caused the growth of informal settlements? To better understand this process it is important to first lay out the historical events and developments that have shaped the city of Belgrade in the post-World War II era.

5. URBAN PLANNING IN THE SFRY AND THE FRY

5.1. Early planning period: 1945-1965

While many of the ideas about post-socialism are based on observations of general trends and patterns, it is important to note that different countries (and cities) emerged from communist rule under different circumstances and also had different experiences under the communist system. Cities such as Belgrade that had existed for hundreds of years already had a tradition of planning and already had an existing urban spatial character which cannot easily be discarded, partly due to the inherent path-dependency of planning (and other) institutions (Tsenkova, 2014; Petrović, 2001).

Yugoslavia was also notably a more “tolerant” communist country due to Tito’s decision to remain in between the Western world and the Soviet Union and its surrounding satellite states during the Cold War. The Yugoslavian version of communism was often considered a middle way between Western capitalism and Soviet centralization, both economically and culturally (Estrin, 1991; Pejovich, 1966; Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Hirt, 2009). It is, in other words, important to remember that the ideal Soviet-style socialist city was not always the result of planning policies even under communist rule, especially not in the case of Belgrade.

This unique political position of Yugoslavia during the Cold War coupled with the already existing planning traditions that exist in cities as old as Belgrade perhaps meant that more idealistic planning projects were less vigorously implemented in Yugoslavia than in, for
example, the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, despite the break with Stalin in 1948, Titoist Yugoslavia adhered (at least initially) strongly to the basic principles of communist doctrine. This meant that practically all land was confiscated after World War II and most urban land and means of production were put under public control (Hirt, 2009; Nedović-Budić & Cavrić, 2006). In similar fashion, the state also took over the role of primary urban developer and created legislation that would ensure a standardized and strictly hierarchical system of planning would be implemented on both a federal and local level (Ibid). This period, from around 1945 to 1965 can be described as a period of central-command planning (Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006).

The urban planning goals in the post-war era were formulated to cope with both the considerable damages left by the war (Stojanović & Martinović, 1978), with about 50 % of all buildings in the city being destroyed or damaged (Le Normand, 2006), and the rapid population growth during the 1940s when it nearly doubled from around 300,000 to nearly 600,000 inhabitants by the end of the decade (Hirt, 2009). When the necessary basic reconstruction of the city had been largely accomplished by the early to mid 1950s the more ideologically driven objectives related to urban planning were put in place (Hirt, 2009; Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Le Normand, 2006). Aside from the massive confiscations of private property that had occurred immediately after 1945 and the common phenomenon of subdividing houses into smaller apartments (Vasović & Marošan, n.d.) there were also mass productions of new residential neighborhoods. The most notable example of this was the large new area across the river Sava from the historical city center which was named “New Belgrade” (Novi Beograd in Serbian).

This system of Soviet-style, almost entirely state-controlled urban planning which focused on a modernist, rationalistic and strictly controlled use of urban land and resources would lose some of its potency towards the end of the 1960s.

5.2. Decentralizing reforms: 1965-1989
Starting in the 1960s, primarily after 1965 (Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006), Yugoslavia began to decentralize and liberalize its political and economic system which set it apart from most other communist countries (Hirt, 2009; Pejovich, 1966; Petrović, 2001). Local communal governmental bodies were given more power over spatial planning than they had had before, and the previous system of more rigid “top-down” dictations of planning ideals was significantly relaxed (Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006; Le Normand, 2006; Hirt, 2009). Spatial planning was no longer decided on a federal but on a local level which meant that the member republics would make their own long-term development plans and municipalities would make and implement local urban plans (Vujosević & Nedović-Budić, 2006). The “top-down” centralized approach to urban and spatial planning as well as towards other social and political issues was, at least nominally, discarded in favor of a “bottom-up” approach of citizen participation. Due to the diverse nature of Yugoslavia, despite the idea of creating a unified communist Yugoslavian nation, it can be argued that this form of participatory planning was necessary or at least more effective in both keeping the country together and for the population to more incrementally imbibe the socialist ethos (Ibid).

The Yugoslavian economy also performed well during this period of reforms, especially
during the 1960s and 1970s with the economic growth peaking around 1979 (Estrin, 1991). There was a significant increase in the number of private small and medium-sized business enterprises, which was unusual for an officially communist state. By the late 1980s Yugoslavia was at the height of its economic and social welfare levels, and one third of the GDP came from the private sector, which was also considerably higher than in other communist states (Hirt, 2009; Hadžić, 2002). This development meant that the Yugoslavian economy would have been in a better position than other communist countries to cope with the changes that came in 1989 and to transition to a market-oriented system (Ibid). Aside from the economic changes, Yugoslavia had (as mentioned earlier) retained close cultural and political links with the West and did not have an isolationist or hostile approach towards it as some neighboring countries did (Hirt, 2009; Le Normand, 2006).

It would have seemed then, that the overall transition from communism would have been quite successful. Despite the various flaws of the socialist system in Yugoslavia in 1989 the reforms that had been implemented in the previous decades and unique political position of Yugoslavia could arguably have made it easier for the country to adapt to new political and economic circumstances. Instead the civil wars in the 1990s would cause massive economic and social damages to the country, which caused this process of transition to be set back at least a decade to the early 2000s (Tsenkova, 2014; Gligorijević, 2012).

5.3. Civil wars and the refugee crisis

In the 1990s the then Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia saw a series of armed conflicts on its territory, starting in Slovenia in 1991, followed by Croatia from 1991-1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995 and Kosovo and Metohija in 1998-1999. These armed conflicts resulted in large numbers of refugees, with nearly four million IDPs in 1991. On the territory of Serbia, there were over 600,000 refugees recorded in 1996, out of which 140,000 were registered in Belgrade where they came to constitute nearly 10% of the total population (UNHCR et al, 1996; Commissariat for Refugees, 2008; Antonijević & Mikić-Zeitoun, 2013).

Together with the refugees from the conflict in Kosovo and Metohija the number of refugees and IDPs in Serbia rose to over 800,000. Although hundreds of centers for these refugees were opened up across the country, many found themselves living in informal housing units, rented rooms wherever they could find them and some eventually built houses themselves, often in informal settlements around larger cities (Vlade Republike Srbije; Commissariat for Refugees 2008). In fact, an estimated 90% of refugees who settled in the city of Belgrade settled in peripheral areas, where most of the informal settlements are located (Gligorijević, 2012). The number of registered refugees and IDPs has decreased considerably since then, due to 200,000 receiving Serbian citizenship, 149,000 returning to their pre-war homes and 49,000 emigrating from Serbia to other countries. Nonetheless the number remains high, with nearly 100,000 registered refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia and many IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija (Commissariat for Refugees, 2008).

Aside from the large number of refugees who came to Serbia, and to the city of Belgrade specifically, it is also important to remember that the country was under strict sanctions from 1992-2001 and suffered from one of the most extreme hyperinflations in history in 1993-1994 causing the economy to shrink by 60% in four years (Hirt, 2009). The country was also
bombed for 78 days by NATO forces in 1999 which caused both a significant number of civilian causalities but also considerable material damage to the country already struggling due to the sanctions and the effects of war. Because of the war and the economical difficulties during the period there was also a considerable number of emigrants, over 100,000 from the city of Belgrade alone, many of whom were young people and highly educated (Gligorijević, 2012).

The experience of post-socialist transition that came about with the fall of communism common to other Eastern European cities was in the case of Belgrade coupled with added social strains due to wars, sanctions, bombings, political instability, corruption, a major refugee crisis and the splitting apart of Yugoslavia into new states. This did not help produce an atmosphere conducive to creating an organized or effective system of governance in general. Hence this development had a significant impact on the field of urban planning as well (Hirt, 2009) which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

6. THE ORIGIN AND EXPANSION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN BELGRADE

6.1. The origin of illegal construction and informal settlements in post-World War II Belgrade

Although the development and growth of informal settlements and illegal construction in Belgrade is generally associated with the post-socialist era, primarily the 1990s (e.g. Gligorijević, 2012; Hirt, 2009; Zegerac, 1999) it is worth taking a closer look at the origins of this phenomenon. While one does not typically associate communism and state socialism with informal settlements or illegal construction, due to its perceived inherent centralization, standardization and emphasis on housing decommodification, the origins of this phenomenon in Belgrade can be traced directly back to the post-war era and the very beginning of the SFRY.

Communist authorities did indeed emphasize the ideals of classical socialist planning theories, and did construct and plan a number of such districts (such as the previously mentioned New Belgrade district), but they simultaneously encouraged and aided a massive population growth due to migration to the capital city which it simply could not handle. Belgrade had suffered from a housing shortage even before World War II, with a considerable population growth in the interwar period and often fairly cramped and poor living conditions in working class areas (Le Normand 2006). Despite a construction boom after World War II the migration to the city and the need for housing increased faster than did the new housing units. By 1965 it was estimated that the city was short of 50,000 apartments, and that same year there were an estimated 10,000 illegal homes housing up to 50,000 people – around 5% of the total population at the time (Ibid).

The authorities resented these new settlements not only because of the inconvenience they caused, but also for going against the ideologically inspired planning ideals held by them (Ibid, p. 262). Informal areas were seen as hotbeds of resistance to the socialist order, as they limited the ability for the authorities to control and direct the private lives of citizens living there (Le Normand, 2006). Oftentimes this was indeed the case, as many of the people living
in informal areas chose to do so for political or ideological reasons, but just as often they were simply people who had believed the regime’s promises for a better life and moved to the city to achieve that (Ibid).

The peripheral areas of the city often suffered from a lack of communal services, water supply, sewerage, telephone networks, road and sidewalk pavement and other basic amenities. The areas also often lacked open, public and other common-use spaces such as playgrounds, community halls and centers, schools, food shops, markets and so on. The dissatisfaction was even frequently discussed in newspapers which were otherwise reluctant to criticize the state (Ibid, p. 254).

A study done in 1967 (Ibid, p. 261) shows that the vast majority (78 %) of illegal builders had arrived in the city in the post-war era between 1946 and 1960 and that most were workers, primarily industry workers. The houses in the emerging informal peripheral areas were very modest, mostly lacking indoor running water and general infrastructure. The areas could not be considered slums however, as around 90 % were rated dry, well-ventilated and well-lit (Ibid). Interestingly, the illegal builders had not generally applied for help from the state. Almost 60 % never asked for help from the state or public sector firms and around half had built their houses solely with the help of family and neighbors although some houses were built with the help of paid labor (Ibid, p. 261). Over 90 % of those surveyed also said that they would rather live in a single family house with a garden than a multi-unit housing complex. In other words the growth of informal settlements was driven not only by necessity due to rapid population growth and lack of housing but also by a desire for a certain way of life which was not provided by the state (Ibid, p. 262).

From 1961 onwards, measures were taken to explicitly deal with the spread of illegal settlements in the city. While there was some discussion on slowing down the demographic growth of the city as a means to reduce the increase of illegal construction, there does not seem to be any evidence of such measure ever taken (Djordjevic in Le Normand, p. 263). The measures taken by the city authorities mainly involved coercion, introducing market reforms and co-opting. Coercion meant that illegal construction would be prosecuted, punished with fines and that the objects built would be destroyed. Due to the fact that it was the rapid population growth and subsequent housing crisis which lead to the increase in illegal construction, this method showed limited success (Le Normand, 2006, p. 263; Zegerac, 1999).

During the reforms in the 1960s the previous state-held monopoly on the production, distribution and maintenance of housing was lifted and construction companies were enabled to produce housing units and then sell them to state-held organs and companies (javna preduzeća) which would then distribute them to their employees. It is however uncertain how much these reforms actually helped the people who had recourse to illegal construction in the first place (Le Normand, 2006, p. 263).

The city administration and the planning authorities also decided to attempt to co-opt the illegal builders. Since the homes built illegally were mostly single-family dwellings it was decided that around 20,000 out of the 100,000 planned new housing units for the period 1964-1971 would be single-family homes. This was done very reluctantly by the Institute of Urbanism, as it was not considered appropriate for a large city to have single-family dwellings, preferring instead multi-unit housing complexes. The attempt was largely
unsuccessful as the residents of illegal houses would rather risk remaining in their existing homes (knowing that the authorities were generally slow to react) than paying the extra costs of infrastructure and land-use that came with the new legal single-family plots (Ibid, p. 264-266).

6.2. The expansion of illegal construction and informal settlements in the 1990s

Despite the fact that the origins of illegal construction and informal settlements can be found already in socialist times the phenomenon remained fairly limited until the 1990s (Zegerac, 1999).

While many of the fundamental reasons for the expansion of illegal construction in the 1990s remained the same as those in the 1960s, they were exacerbated by the unstable political situation at the time. Some of those factors include (Zegerac, 1999; Le Normand, 2006):

- An unfavorable financial policy and lack of support for individual housing characteristic of the socialist system.
- The ideologically and politically driven housing market which favored certain types of housing units, primarily collective dwellings and apartment complexes.
- Ineffective legislation and administration and a lack of enforcement of existing planning laws.
- A lack of available sites designated for individual housing with basic utilities and a general lack of urban plans.

All of these factors, and every other flaw in the previous system that could have been kept under control, were further exacerbated by the massive influx of migrants – primarily refugees fleeing from war zones but also by economic migrants from other parts of Serbia (see section 5.3; Zegerac, 1999; Tsenkova, 2009). While the fall of communism in 1989 had created challenges in adapting to a new, more decentralized market-oriented system, the unstable social situation created by the civil wars, economic sanctions and so on also lead to an erosion of general respect for and compliance to the law.

The system of housing distribution that had existed under communism also largely collapsed in the 1990s which meant that it became practically impossible to get housing via the public sector firms or to get a loan to build a house. Aside from a large number of refugees, the children of those who settled in the city in the post-World War II era had grown up and also needed housing. Since the state still owned practically all land at this time, but did not give out building permits or react to this growing need in an efficient way, illegal construction boomed. This did not only include new unplanned settlements, or outgrowths of existing settlements, but also illegal extensions and rebuilding of buildings within existing urban plans (Interview 1; Antić & Mitrović, 2013).

A common practice that had existed for a long time but which became more common in the 1990s was the illegal occupancy of land. This was primarily due to the ongoing confusion over landownership that characterized the post-socialist period in Yugoslavia (Interview 1; Interview 3; Petrović, 2001; Mikelić et al 2005; Nedović-Budić et al, 2011) and due to the
previously discussed weakness of the state apparatus to effectively deal with the problems of unplanned urban growth. There are numerous examples of settlements that grew up illegally, comprised mostly or entirely of illegally built houses, which eventually gained a de facto legal status (Tsenkova et al, 2009, p. 296-297).

While some of those who came to the city (either as refugees or as economic migrants) may have been reluctant to seek building permits, it is important to remember that even if they chose to do so, building permits were very expensive, difficult to obtain and oftentimes took longer to get than the actual construction process itself (IBRD/ The World Bank 2010 in Tsenkova, 2014).

With the decline of the socialist welfare state, and with decreased support from the state for vulnerable social groups, social inequalities increased considerably during the 1990s creating a more class-divided society. This new two-speed urban economy with low-paid service jobs and a privileged sector of highly paid professionals, coupled with cutbacks in social welfare and reduced spending on social programs, also helped create a two-speed housing market (Tsenkova, 2008 and Tsenkova, 2010 in Tsenkova, 2014). While refugees and the urban poor on the one hand tended to settle in peripheral areas (Gligorijević, 2012) and informal or illegal housing, the newly formed elites tended to form new gated communities (Tsenkova, 2014; Hirt & Petrović 2011). In the case of Belgrade this spatial segregation was sometimes less pronounced, as the phenomenon of illegal construction became common within all social categories, with large numbers of illegal villas in more upscale neighborhoods such as Dedinje not being uncommon (Hirt, 2009; Vujović and Petrović, 2007 in Tsenkova, 2014).

By 1997, around 50% of all new housing production in Belgrade was considered illegal and/or substandard (Stanilov, 2007; Hirt, 2009) and informal settlements have since then come to comprise around 22% of the total land of construction and 40% of residential areas (Tsenkova et al, 2009). Despite the inherent negative connotation of the terms “illegal” or “informal” settlement, there are some who argue that the growth of such areas might have been necessary as a form of social housing in a time when almost all public housing became privatized – up to 98% in 1994 (Hirt, 2009). Since the public sector practically stopped any investment in housing production and since private investors were unable to function within the limits of existing planning regulations due to the internal crisis within the existing planning institutions, new private construction was pushed into illegality (Antonić & Mitrović, 2013; Hirt, 2009).

While the difficult circumstances of the 1990s led to an increase of illegal construction the question remains how the process looks today and how the authorities are working with this problem, which will be discussed in the following chapters.
7. A PLANNER’S PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

In this section I will primarily present and discuss the results from the interviews I conducted with an architect at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1), an architect and urban planner at the Institute of Urbanism (Interview 3) and a researcher and public official at the Office of the Director of City Planning (Interview 5).

7.1. The changing role of planning authorities from socialism until today

Concerning the organization of the city administration, the informant at the municipality of Čukarica noted that the city administration in Belgrade was in many ways less centralized under socialism than it is today (Interview 1). Even though the district of Belgrade (also called the City of Belgrade) is subdivided into 17 municipalities, these municipalities have very little practical influence over the planning process. Practically all major decisions on planning (and other administrative decisions) are made by the city administration, specifically the Secretariat of Urban Planning under the direction of the city’s Chief Architect. The Secretariat gives directions and decides which plans are to be implemented and how, on the entire territory of the City of Belgrade (with a population of around 1,700,000 inhabitants). Since Belgrade consists of more than one municipality, each individual municipality arguably has less autonomy in Belgrade than in other parts of Serbia (Interview 1; Hirt, 2009).

Under socialism, the Institute of Urbanism, which was founded in 1948, had the primary role of creating and implementing urban plans. The plans made were in accordance with planning directives created at the federal level and were then systematically implemented on a federal, republican and then a local level (Hirt, 2009; Nedović-Budić & Cevrić, 2006; Interview 1; Interview 3). While the Institute had a monopoly on planning, local municipalities had a more significant role in urban planning (in particular in terms of implementation and inspection) on a local level then than they do now, especially with the decentralizing reforms starting in the 1960s (Interview 1).

The Institute of Urbanism would start to lose much of its importance in the 1980s when private actors entered the scene, breaking its previous monopoly on planning in the city. From then onwards the Institute has had to coexist with a growing number of private actors and newly formed alternative planning institutions. Today, the Institute of Urbanism is only officially responsible for creating the master plan (which is a strategic overarching plan for the city of Belgrade, though not all municipalities in the district) and general regulation plans (plans that show typological requirements, streets and road networks, housing block outlines and so on). The lowest level of plans, namely detailed regulation plans (plan detaljne regulacije) can now be made by any planning institution, private company or developer or by private citizens who have the means to create such plans (see Figure 4; Interview 1; Interview 3).

Whether or not this shift towards a more decentralized, demonopolized approach to planning has had positive results or not remains debatable. One of the informants (Interview 1) pointed out that it has in fact often led to an increased level of confusion, especially in regards to the problem of illegal construction and informal settlements. Despite the appearance of a move towards decentralization in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, political changes in the city at the end of the 1990s and throughout the 2000s ended up once
again centralizing the city administration. One informant (Interview 1) pointed out that this process continued under a series of mayors, eventually leading to practically all functions being moved from the municipal level to the city administration.

One example of this centralization that has arguably created more obstacles to the creation and implementation of functional urban plans is the creation of the various secretariats at the city administration in the 1990s. The Secretariat of Urban Planning now has the task of implementing urban plans without the analytical function that the Institute of Urbanism once had (Interview 1). In other words, the analysis of urban plans is done separately, usually by the Institute of Urbanism or some other planning institution, while the Secretariat is in charge of making the executive decision of implementing it or not (Figure 4; Interview 1; Interview 3).

This has largely reduced the role of both local municipal planning authorities and the city’s Institute of Urbanism to the function of “active observers” (Ibid). The planners at these institutions simply give their recommendations and opinions which are then supposed to be taken into consideration in the planning process. It is nonetheless the city administration in the form of the Secretariat of Urban Planning that makes the final decision on implementation, so these opinions are not decisive in this process (Ibid).

It can also be argued that this centralization makes planning mechanisms more ineffective as it becomes more difficult for the city administration to have an adequate overview of the local conditions in all parts of the city and the needs of the local residents. It would seem that my own inability to arrange an interview with an official at the Secretariat of Urban Planning was not unique, as there is also a lack of communication between the city administration and the local municipalities, which was implied by the informant at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1). Whether it is because of a lack of will, a lack of financial or other resources or some other factors (or a combination of all the aforementioned) the end result is a lack of efficient planning mechanisms and a lack of clarity and consistency in the planning process.

In practice this also enables the “ politicization” of urban planning, as political will becomes increasingly important in tipping the scales, so to speak, for the implementation of certain plans and the investment in certain projects but not in others (Ibid). One example is of course the project Belgrade Waterfront, which was not only approved on a state level as opposed to the normal process of having construction projects processed on a local level (through the city administration in the case of Belgrade) but was also approved with surprising speed considering the project’s scale and the controversy surrounding it (Interview 3; Večernje Novosti, 2015). There is in other words a very strong support for the project from the ruling political establishment which goes to show that it is not simply a lack of funds, or even a lack of planning mechanisms, that is decisive in the process of urban planning in the city.

According to the informant at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1), this politicization also in practice largely excludes the municipal and local authorities from the planning process and leaves the municipality with more menial responsibilities such as building inspection and handing out building permits for smaller building objects (Figure 4) while largely excluding it from the development of new urban plans.
7.2. On the problem of illegal construction and informal settlements

When discussing the problem of illegal construction and unplanned settlements it was noteworthy that the definitions of what constitutes an informal/unplanned settlement as opposed to an illegal settlement became more important. Since illegality in the context of illegal construction denotes a lack of legal status for the particular building structure (i.e. a lack of a necessary building permit) it does not say much about the structure itself or the area which surrounds it (Interview 4). An illegal building can be either a simple shack or a villa, and an illegal area can be inhabited by both well off residents or by the very poorest segment of society.

In a Serbian context, and specifically in the context of Belgrade, the term “illegal settlement” tends to be used when discussing areas dominated by spontaneously built shacks, cardboard houses or otherwise very basic structures mostly inhabited by segments of the Roma population (Interview 1; Interview 4). And while the latter areas do exist, they are not very numerous. The number of illegal structures in total however is very high – around 180,000 in Belgrade alone and over one million, or one third of all buildings, in Serbia in total (Ministry of Urbanism, 2015) – and the spread of uncontrolled urban growth on the peripheries of the city is not only common but rather the norm (Interview 4; Tsenkova, 2014).

So, although illegality and informality are closely linked they are not always synonymous in the context of urban growth in Belgrade. Illegal structures can, and do exist everywhere in the city including in the center and also includes extensions to existing structures, attic conversions and so on (Interview 4). On the peripheries of the city however, buildings may be legal or illegal but the streets and the infrastructure is not planned in advance and is simply added as time goes by. It is very common that the owners of illegally built houses apply for a building permit after the house is already built, oftentimes several years after the house was completed. This gives the house legal status, the owner starts paying property taxes and everything is as it should be from a legal perspective – but the house itself, and oftentimes surrounding houses, are not built according to any sort of urban plan (Interview 1; Interview 3; Interview 4).

The informant at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1), where the suburban settlement of Sremčica is located, made the distinction between Sremčica and other areas such as Kaluđerica (known as the largest informal settlement in Europe). Since Sremčica was originally a village with an urban plan from the 1970s it is not generally considered unplanned or at least not entirely unplanned. Kaluđerica started growing already in the 1960s and 1970s in such a way that when someone received a permit to build on and utilize, for example, one hectare of land the person who received the permit would subsequently divide up the land and sell it off, which was illegal at the time.

By contrast, in places like Sremčica there was an urban plan, there was an established (albeit not very extensive) network of roads and there was also a large number of holiday homes as well as the 1970s communist-era housing area Gorica at the northern end of the settlement (Interview 1). Until the 1990s the vast majority of the buildings in Sremčica (in the range of 90 %) were legally built, especially around the old center and around the main road Beogradska, but with the influx of refugees that started to change. Many of the refugees who came bought land outside the old core of the village since it was considerably cheaper, and
started building houses (Ibid). These houses were initially mostly built without building permits but were often legalized later in an ad hoc manner as described previously.

In terms of the creation and implementation of urban plans it is important to note that while plans generally do exist, they are often outdated. In the case of Sremčica, there was only the plan from the 1970s and until 2010 (Službeni List Grada Beograda, 2010) there was no detailed regulation plan. So, while plans and all the necessary rules do exist there are no adequate mechanisms to implement them. The lack of plans is therefore arguably not the major problem, but rather the lack of appropriate mechanisms for plan implementation. According to the informants at both the municipality of Čukarica and at the Institute of Urbanism the reasons for this development were all the factors discussed previously (civil war, political instability, the economic crisis and so on) but also the inability of the state apparatus to find an appropriate model to cope with the new circumstances, something which has continued until today (Interview 1; Interview 3).

The informant at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1) also mentioned two further obstacles to urban planning. The first one is related to the loss of the function of the formerly lowest administrative division of a municipality known as a mesna zajednica, which roughly translates to a local community center. These centers were supposed to act as places which the local population could to turn in order to get informed and resolve local problems. With the increased centralization of the city administration these local community centers (just as the municipalities they form a part of) have lost most of their previous functions. This is also linked to the lack of transparency and the lack of trust among local residents for the city authorities, which makes many reluctant to pay property taxes and to seek building permits (Interview 1; Interview 2).

According to the informant from the Office of the Director of City Planning (Interview 5) there is also a tendency for people to build houses outside the urban zone of Belgrade because it is cheaper to build there and then entreat the city authorities to supply all necessary amenities, such as sewerage, water supply, electricity and public transportation. This, the informant argues, tends to strain the city budget especially since many of the houses lack building permits and do not pay property taxes (Ibid).

7.3. Suggestions for future development
The informant at the municipality of Čukarica (Interview 1) believes that it is first of all necessary to simplify the process of attaining building permits and to register existing, illegally built objects (which is purportedly the idea behind the current push for legalization by state authorities). There must also be a clear way of creating and implementing urban plans, which is currently too expensive for most private citizens to fund and only made by the city authorities if there is a political will to do so.

The informant at the Institute of Urbanism (Interview 3) reiterated and emphasized the importance of political will in the process of urban planning. If there was such a strong political will to carry through the project Belgrade Waterfront then the same willpower can and should be applied to other projects that are beneficial for the city. Regarding informal settlements the informant believes it is necessary to intensify and improve inspections and make sure inspectors do their job and more frequently visit the areas affected. The example
used was the following: there are two ski slopes on the territory covered by the Master Plan of Belgrade but only one actually functions as such. The other one has, over the years, been overbuilt by illegal houses and is now a part of an informal settlement. This demonstrates that, despite existing laws and plans, neither the political will nor the planning mechanisms necessary are in place.

Regarding the Belgrade Waterfront project the informant (Interview 3) believes it is a good start in the sense that it was necessary for the city to remediate the land but the architectural content and other aspects of the entire project is of course debatable (which also seemed to be the view of the other informants), although no clear opinion was expressed either way.

The city authorities are, according to one informant (Interview 5) currently working on a strategy for Belgrade’s development in the near future. I was informed that this new strategy will be presented in a conference next year, and one of the themes will be unplanned settlements and the necessity to produce a functioning framework for urban growth and urbanization (Ibid).

In regards to the new laws introduced to deal with illegal construction and the new push for legalization by authorities a number of the informants expressed some skepticism as to the actual results it is going to have. There was also a sense that the city authorities in particular prefer not to discuss planning issues related to illegality and informality or problems related to the Belgrade Waterfront project – instead the focus tends to be on various future plans and visions. The root of this can of course be manifold – perhaps it is a combination of a sense of inadequacy and general weariness about the subject or perhaps some other reasons.

8. A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS – THE CASE OF SREMČICA

In this section I will present and discuss the results from the interview I conducted with the head of a local NGO in Sremčica called Naša Sremčica (Interview 2) and the observations I made of the area during my visit there.

8.1. A description of Sremčica
Sremčica is located just outside of what is considered the city proper of Belgrade, but within the territory covered by the city’s Master Plan (figure 4 in Hirt, 2009). The official number of residents in the area is around 23,000 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2011) while the estimation based on data from the local health center is around 27,000 and the number of registered voters is around 19,800 (Interview 2).

At the northern entrance of Sremčica is the settlement Gorica which has its own local community center (mesna zajednica) but is geographically united with Sremčica. The area was built in the 1970s and consists of fairly typical communist-era housing blocks around four stories high. The southern part of the area in particular looks well kept and was visibly built according to an urban plan. The buildings are also of good quality for the most part with renovated facades and plenty of greenery (see appendix 2, figure 5). Along the edges of this settlement some new unplanned, mostly illegal, streets and houses have arisen on former
agricultural fields. Many houses are unfinished with bare tiles and lacking isolation, and some streets are dirt tracks lacking any sort of paving (figure 6).

The main street Beogradska runs through the settlement with smaller side streets that until fairly recently oftentimes did not have their own names. The newly given names of many streets are derived from towns and areas from which many of the current residents originally came from, such as Leposavićka referring to the town of Leposavić in Kosovo, or are simply named after a certain family that owns (or owned) the adjacent land or who were part of the original families who lived in the village.

Some of the major streets in the area have new asphalt and are just broad enough for bidirectional traffic, but all of the streets I visited (except the main road Beogradska) lack sidewalks. Aside from the main road with some of the surrounding streets there are almost no traffic signs, but there are clear street signs in almost every place I visited. Other streets are for the most part very narrow, although most were paved.

Around the core of the actual settlement itself one can see new unplanned streets with houses around it, starting to form. A dirt road that is essentially two tire tracks leads up to one or several houses behind the property located by the already existing street. After a time the dirt road is paved, more and more houses are built along this street which keeps extending in an organic manner and will thus lead to a new addition to the already existing informality (figure 9).

Along the main road there are numerous shops, bakeries, restaurants and various other businesses and public buildings such as a post office. There are also several smaller shops and even market stands or sheds (especially on the side streets) that are most likely unregistered or informal, as part of the sizable informal economy in the city (Tsenkova 2014). Some of these presumably informal businesses are operated out of garages or the ground floor of private homes.

Considering the fact that many of the refugees and others who settled in Sremčica were or became fairly well-off (Interview 4) it is perhaps not surprising to see many large, beautiful houses with well-kept gardens (figure 7), some with swimming pools, often surrounded by walls with gates (and in some cases even with camera surveillance). On the other hand there are also many houses that are quite dilapidated, many that are unfinished with bare tiles and some dwellings that are nothing more than hovels or sheds. It is notable that members of the local Roma population tend to inhabit the houses of the lowest quality.

There are very few parks or public green areas in the actual settlement, although there are two larger forests right at the edge of it, to the south and to the northeast. The only public park is in front of the post office and close to the largest primary school in the area. In the churchyard of the local Orthodox Christian parish church there is also a small park or garden with benches and a playground.

Since the settlement has grown up in an uncontrolled and unplanned manner, there are many agricultural fields and orchards in between and in the backyards of many houses (figure 8). Some of these are still visibly in use by the residents.
8.2. On the lack of dialogue between residents of Sremčica and civil authorities

According to the informant (Interview 2), the purpose of the organization Naša Sremčica is to gather and activate local residents and to use their skills to formulate ideas for further development of the area.

There is however, according to the informant, very little activity on the part of the local residents of Sremčica, and since everything is centralized and goes through the city administration there is very little attention paid from the side of planning authorities to the needs of local residents in Sremčica, or in any other similar area in the city. The view of the informant was also that there is very little information from the authorities, and despite the fact that there is currently a detailed regulation plan for the area, its content is barely know or even comprehensible to most residents. This, he believes, is due to a lack of communication between the various levels of administration and citizens and also because of the difficult layout and composition of many planning documents (Ibid).

The informant pointed out that the organization has done a number of things for the local community, but what is notable is that all such initiatives depends on citizen involvement, not on the local community centers or the local municipal authorities who are not fulfilling their intended roles in the community (Ibid).

One of the undertakings of the organization has to do with telephone connections which had previously been more expensive in suburban settlements than they were in the city itself. Various organizations and NGOs in affected suburbs petitioned the Serbian telecommunications company Telekom and were able to get connections at the same rates as those in the city (Ibid). The organization also played an important role in the expansion of bus lines and increasing the number of buses in the area. It is important to note that despite this improvement in the accessibility to public transportation there is still a greater need. While the nearby communist-era neighborhood of Železik located just to the north of Sremčica has seven bus lines going through it, Sremčica has only two, this despite the fact that the two areas are almost identical in terms of population size. Out of these two bus lines, one ends in Gorica which is located right at the beginning of Sremčica, which means that the rest of the settlement (which stretches out five kilometers along the main road Beogradska) is served by only one bus line.

The city has also been reluctant to give financial or other forms of aid to the municipalities or the local community centers as well as other citizen’s groups and initiatives (Ibid). This trend seems to indicate a growing rather than closing chasm between the authorities and citizens and affects residents in the informal settlements in the city above all.

This inaction on the part of authorities in dealing with problems facing residents in Sremčica, and informal settlements in general, leaves residents having to actively advocate for basic infrastructure is a general trend in the city (Tsenkova et al 2009) and has its roots in the post-World War II era (section 6.1; Le Normand 2006).
8.3. On the main problems facing the residents of Sremčica

The main problem identified was the lack of cooperation with local authorities and the lack of easy access to information. This is in turn linked to the process of centralization, as discussed previously, and the informant noted that despite promises by every government after October 2000 (see introduction) to decentralize governing bodies, nothing significant has happened (Interview 2).

There is also a need for clarification of the existing detailed regulation plan. One example of this is an area close to the old village center which is designated as an industrial zone but without any specifications on what that actually entails (Ibid). This lack of clarity can also be seen as hampering further development of Sremčica, as the particular area in question remains unused partly because of it. It can also be argued that such designations are made without any careful consideration or even any serious intent of realization due to reasons of convenience and even political expediency (Ibid). This would tie in with one of the major problems discussed by the informant (as well as by several of the other informants) – namely the politicization of society (Ibid). This means that it becomes more difficult for citizens to turn to various public institutions or agencies such as the local community centers for their needs or problems. Instead it has become more advantageous to be a member of a certain political party and to resolve your problems through personal contacts.

In line with all previous informants, the informant also believes there are considerable problems with corruption and fraud (in which he includes the Belgrade Waterfront project which is generally seen as riddled with corruption) and noted that many, or perhaps most, have little faith in the authorities (Ibid).

My empirical data from all interviews also demonstrates that a lack of faith in authorities is one of the main reasons for the reluctance on the part of residents to pay property taxes, fees for building permits or any other investment in local infrastructure. Before the turbulent 1990s there were various local efforts to, for example, bring in sewerage in all parts of Sremčica, but the money that was collected over time was never used for its intended purpose due to the wars, inflation and general instability (Ibid) which created a bad precedent.

There has also generally not been any need for people to apply for building permits since there have not, for the most part, been any consequences for illegal construction (note parallels in section 6.1). However, the common practice of retrospective legalization has created a considerable problem for the residents of the area. While the land in and around the core of the old village is defined as built-up or urbanized land (građevinske zemljište), individual houses were largely, and are still sometimes, illegal. Although many of the buildings now have permits, the urban framework in which they were built retains the same features it did before.

This has added to the problem with a lack of public transportation since the streets are often too narrow to have buses going through them. Some residents have to walk long distances to get to the nearest bus stop, simply because of this combination of a lack of public transportation on the one hand (due to the inaction of the authorities) and the irregular nature of the streets which makes it difficult to resolve the problem.
8.4 Visions for the future

In terms of more general changes that are necessary for the improvement of the conditions in Sremčica a number of suggestions can be identified. The first is the decentralization and the return of the original purpose and function of the local community centers. This, one can argue, will help improve the means of information and citizen dialogue and the problem of transparency; due to the centralized structure of the city administration all tax money is collected centrally and becomes fungible. It is not clear at the moment just how much actually “returns” to the local community in form of investments in infrastructure and the like (Interview 2). If this is clarified, the trust in the authorities might increase and local residents may be more willing to pay both property taxes and to seek building permits and follow existing building regulations. This could become a basis for a new approach to planning discussed at length by Alemie (2015) in which policy making and spatial analysis becomes integrated with the existing social context.

One aspect that is worth noting in the case of Sremčica and other similar unplanned or informal settlements is that, while there is a lack of many basic amenities (such as sewerage, suitable roads, adequate public transportation, social services and so on) there is also a strong sense of self-reliance among the locals. The residents often originally came from smaller towns and villages and many simply wish to continue living as they are, in other words relatively independent of the system (Interview 4) – a trend similar to the one identified in the earliest unplanned settlements in the 1960s (Le Normand, 2006).

The most pressing need then, based on observations of the area, would be for a comprehensive urban plan showing the road network, regulating the width of roads and the proportions of buildings and then enforcing these basic rules, using for example existing laws on expropriation of land for the sake of public roads (Interview 4). If this is done and properly communicated to the residents (Alemie 2015) it would at least make it possible to create a functioning urban framework within which the settlement can continue to grow in a planned manner.

9. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In conclusion one can say that there have been a few recurrent themes in the discourse on informal settlements and illegal construction in Belgrade. One was the question of the role of the city administration, and specifically the Secretariat of Urban Planning, in the planning process in relation to the local municipalities and planning institutions such as the Institute of Urbanism. There was a common perception among most of the informants that the increasing centralization of the city administration poses a problem for dealing with issues of urban planning in an efficient way.

Another important theme was that of the role of politics in planning. From both a local level and from the level of planning authorities there is a sense that political will is decisive in determining where the focus of planning will be. While this is perhaps nothing unique to Belgrade, the outcome tends to be a constant struggle between the interests of the authorities and the interests of the public, especially those living in informal settlements. There is in other words very little initiative on the part of the authorities to resolve pressing local issues.
(such as a lack of infrastructure, sewerage, social services and so on) or underlying issues such as the ongoing presence of refugees and IDPs who have still not been properly integrated into society. While local citizens’ initiatives may give some limited results (e.g. Interview 2; Tsenkova, 2014) such as an expansion of bus lines, there is never any premeditated plan of action. Detailed regulation plans are either only made retrospectively as an area has already grown up or exist beforehand but without being properly implemented. When a political interest exists however, as in the case of the Belgrade Waterfront project, a considerable amount of willpower is exhibited by the authorities to carry through with the project.

As the new process of legalization of illegal building objects continues in Serbia, it is important to examine the motivation behind the new laws. While there can be a general consensus that something must be done to curtail the spread of informality and illegal construction, the main problem, I would argue, is in the lack of planning mechanisms for the implementation of functioning urban plans. When houses are legalized retrospectively, the owner will start paying a property tax. One can argue that this is necessary to create an adequate tax base from which to fund, for example, new infrastructure projects in the area. However, this will not change the already existing structure if it does not comply with appropriate building and zoning regulations and considering the general lack of trust for authorities indicated by the empirical data, it is worth reconsidering this approach.

As for the origin of informal settlements and illegal construction, it is quite clear that it can be found already in the post-World War II era, especially in the 1960s, or perhaps even before that (Le Normand, 2006; Interview 4) although it became more common in the 1990s. It is important to note the similarities between both the way these areas grew and functioned and the problems the residents faced, and how the authorities dealt with them then and now. The same lack of everything from schools and parks to public transportation and sewerage can be seen in both periods. Under socialism measures were taken to deal with the issue of illegal construction but with fairly limited success, as discussed by Le Normand (2006). The coercive measures were proven to be ineffective overall, as people would risk staying in illegally built homes or continue building without permits. Once the authorities established a precedent of relative laxity and inaction, no amount of laws could resolve the problem which instead kept on growing. As the authorities – for ideological, economical and other reasons – wanted to continue the massive population growth and migration to the city, but were unable to produce the corresponding number of homes, the spread of informal settlements continued. At the same time, the authorities saw their existence as an embarrassment, a failure and even to some extent an ideological threat.

Today, I would argue, much of the same way of thinking remains. In previous decades, socialist ideals of new residential areas with uniform apartment blocks were seen as a step towards modernity and the efforts of planning authorities were almost entirely focused on realizing these ideals. Today it is projects like Belgrade Waterfront that have come to represent modernity, and there is surprisingly little focus on resolving, not the question of legality per se, but rather the underlying issues which cause the phenomenon of informal settlements in the first place. While the lack of functional urban plans is the most obvious underlying issue, there is also the previously mentioned problem of the status of refugees and migrants from other parts of the country who are the primary residents of these areas. As in
communist times, the authorities find themselves unable to cope with the influx of people and to provide housing, so people find their own ways to meet their needs. This becomes both a relief and a problem for the authorities – a relief since it takes pressure off them and a problem since it leads to a continued growth of informal settlements.

While the turbulent 1990s left Belgrade with the problems caused by the collapse of the previous socialist system, which it holds in common with other cities in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, it also had to face these challenges in a time of civil war. I would argue that the effects of nearly a decade of civil war, hundreds of thousands of refugees, economic sanctions and bombings have had the decisive impact on the planning trajectory of the city.

Due to all these factors, many of which are still felt today, the city has not been able to find a new planning paradigm and to create functioning planning mechanisms, which means that informality will most likely continue to be an important factor in the city in the foreseeable future.
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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

1) How does the process of urban planning work in Belgrade today?

2) How do various institutions cooperate and produce plan documents and how do they implement these – with focus specifically on informal settlements?

3) What are some of the challenges to implementing plans in such areas?

4) What is the view of planning authorities on new project such as Belgrade Waterfront? What are the ideas or motivations behind the investments in this particular project?

5) How do planning authorities respond to criticism of the project, especially related to investments of public funds, considering a still existing need for investments in informal/unplanned areas?

6) What visions are there for the future? What is necessary to make the planning process more effective, to reduce illegal construction, to integrate migrants and refugees and so on?
Figure 1: Serbia in Europe. Source: Google Maps

Figure 2: The location of Sremčica within the City of Belgrade. Source: Google Earth.
**Figure 3:** Sremčica with the three parts of the observation marked with red (first part) yellow (second part) and green (third part). Source: Google Earth.

**Figure 4:** Simplified overview of the role of planning institutions in Belgrade.
Figure 5: Apartment block in Gorica

Figure 6: New houses on the outskirts of Sremčica
Figure 7: House in Sremčica

Figure 8: Old and new houses mix with agricultural fields and power lines
Figure 9: A new street forming on the outskirts of Sremčica