

# Sociopolitical Changes and City Growth – a Case Study of Novi Sad, Serbia

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## 1 ABSTRACT

The specific correlation between sociopolitical changes and the process of city growth is explored in the case study of a city of Novi Sad, the medium sized city, second largest regional center in Serbia and the capital of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The analysis includes structural and functional transformations of the city-periphery that characterized 3 significant periods in recent history of Novi Sad. The city-edge of Novi Sad is considered the most visible representative of specific circumstances and unique mixture of different conditions related to social and historical background, site-specific characteristics, local development processes and governmental regulations. In the last couple of years urban planning and its mechanisms aspire to rise up to the challenges of the transitional process and the new demographic status of the city. This paper addresses some of these mechanisms and their possible outcomes.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

The issues surrounding the global phenomena of population growth and urbanization have been extensively addressed in literature over the last decades. Studies propose a variety of approaches and the topics range from analyses of demographic changes, assessments of the environmental impacts of urbanization, to economic analyses of issues related to globalization and regionalism.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, studies investigating spatial patterning of these processes and physical characteristics of the urban fringe have been relatively rare, despite the magnitude of environmental, economic and social problems generated. Great diversity and complexity of new urban extensions reflect a number of common principles, but at the same time strongly indicate existing differences in local and regional social, economic, historical and physical conditions that coincide in their formation.

To begin to tackle the large question of how different conditions interplay in the formation of suburban environments, in this paper we propose a case-study of the city of Novi Sad, the medium sized city, second largest regional center in Serbia and the capital of the predominantly rural Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. In particular the specific correlation between sociopolitical changes and the process of city growth is explored following the fact that city's recent history involved profound social, economic and political transformation. The change model since the 1950's and especially since the 1990's was more radical compared to moderate models in the majority of other Central and Eastern European countries. The city-scape was changed irreversibly with the most radical spatial changes happening at the edge of the city which could therefore be interpreted as spatial projection of society, using Lefebvre's vocabulary<sup>2</sup>. Different transformation processes brought about unqualified urban spaces in peripheral areas often irrespective of social and economic development. In this paper these spaces are considered the most visible representatives of specific circumstances and unique mixture of different conditions related to social and historical background, site-specific characteristics, local development processes and governmental regulations. The analysis includes structural and functional transformations of the city-periphery that characterized 3 significant periods in recent history of Novi Sad. The 3 periods – the period after World War II, the 1990's and the period after 2000, presented enormous challenges for the management of urban development, mechanisms of which were greatly influenced by the social and political embedding ranging from a communist, a totalitarian socialist to a democratic market-based society.

<sup>1</sup> STANILOV, Kiril: Postwar Growth and Suburban Development. In: STANILOV, Kiril, CASE SCHEER, Brenda (eds.): Suburban Form – an International Perspective. London, 2004. p. 2

<sup>2</sup> LEFEBVRE, Henry: Writing on Cities. Malden, Oxford, 2006, p. 87

### 3 NOVI SAD – THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY

According to the most recent official census from 2002, Novi Sad is Serbia's second largest city, after Belgrade<sup>3</sup>. With its municipal population of around 371 000 inhabitants Novi Sad is a medium sized city located on the banks of the Danube river, while facing the northern slopes of Fruška Gora mountain. It is an industrial and financial centre of Serbian economy and also one of the biggest construction sites in the region. Besides the urban part of the city, there are 12 more settlements and 1 town in the municipal area. Some of the suburbs have grown over the years and physically merged with the city. Most of them have a strong rural character and are highly dependent on the city of Novi Sad and its functions.

The first significant period in the history of Novi Sad that was marked by rapid city-growth as a consequence of radical social, political and economic changes was after World War II. The population growth was mostly channeled to the unbuilt areas at the city-edge. Strong government support facilitated the large projects and whole new neighborhoods with modern high-rise residential buildings emerged from the fields surrounding the city, to foster the huge influx of people from the countryside especially in the 1970's. During that period, the socialist state (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) was embracing modern ethos in order to create "new and better society"<sup>4</sup>. Rationalization and industrialization in the construction of residential areas were considered necessary to resolve the issue of housing shortage which became one of the priorities of the state. There were almost no signs of social polarization during the socialist era and the coexistence of residents with different socio-economic status is still typical of the communist-era housing districts in Novi Sad. On the other hand a number of functional, environmental, technical and economic problems were created in these neighborhoods that are typical of many other multi-family housing complexes built in the post-war period throughout Europe and also in other parts of the world. These problems include low quality of services and public programmes, uniform architecture, low eco-efficiency of the urban structure and the buildings, poorly managed landscape etc. Since the construction little was done in order to resolve these issues, diminish negative environmental impacts and improve urban sustainability.

	1948	1953	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002
Number of residents in the City	111,358	120,686	155,685	206,821	250,138	265,464	306,306
Changes in number of residents in the City	/	9,328	34,999	51,136	43,317	15,326	40,842
Growth rate of number of residents in the City (%)	/	8.38	29.00	32.85	20.94	6.13	15.39
Growth rate of number of residents in the district (%)	/	5.17	14.73	12.29	10.68	2.79	9.97
Growth rate of number of residents in Serbia (%)	/	6.34	8.37	7.86	7.31	1.21	0.90

Source: Republic Institute for Statistics of Serbia "Census 2002"

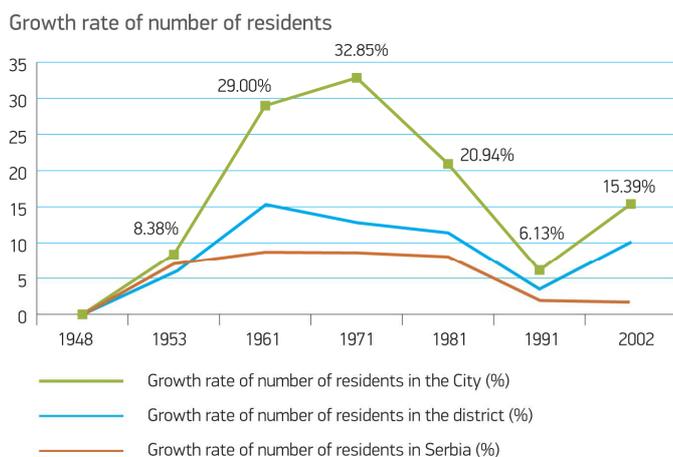


Fig. 1: Changes in number of residents in the City of Novi Sad since 1950s (Community Profile, City of Novi Sad, Local Economic Development Office, 2010, p.30)

<sup>3</sup> STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova 2002 (Official Census 2002). Belgrade, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> BLAGOJEVIĆ, Ljiljana: Novi Beograd – Osporeni modernizam. Beograd, 2007, p. 11



The other 2 selected periods coincide with recent demographic changes that had 2 significant peaks – one was war-related and the other came as a result of postcommunist transitional process and the rise of economical activities and employment. Contrary to other CEE countries where the steady growth of the urban population from the 1980's discontinued abruptly in 1990<sup>5</sup>, in the past 20 years Serbia was experiencing a significant shift in demographics. At the same time the state has suffered from economical stagnation due to country fragmentation (split of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), which affected numerous sectors of the state economy. Furthermore, this process affected different regions of country in a diverse manner. The city of Novi Sad in particular has undergone radical changes both within its social and spatial structure that even today are unparalleled in the region in terms of their nature and rate.

In the 1990ties, the specific societal, political and economic conditions have led to the great population growth, since the city has been rapidly populated by war- and postwar immigrants from western parts of former Yugoslavia refugees. Migration led to the instant demographic boom, which meant significant housing development, especially in Novi Sad as the capital of the Province. This has provided a context for the rapid expansion of the city and caused great changes of the built form that previous master plans could not anticipate. Housing development, in short, went in two directions: the occupation of agricultural land with illegal single-family houses and the replacement of existing single-family houses in the city with multi-family buildings. The uncontrolled urban sprawl firstly formed a ribbon development along the main access road connecting inner city with the suburb of Veternik. The next phase of growth involved emergence of large complexes consisted of individual houses built illegally on arable land. Further on many other monotonous environments, lacking spatial complexity and articulation, were built and the traditional city-boundaries have been dissolved. Even the specific housing typology was created by building several houses on the same individual lot. These illegal structures were built by the members of the same family that came from the western regions of former Yugoslavia or by refugees that occupied the space without consent of the original land owner. Even today the ownership of the properties is not easy to establish.

Over the next 10 years population of the suburban settlement of Veternik doubled to 18,000 and the total built up area was increased by 40%. This brought up new contrasts on both spatial and social levels, since the suburb became inhabited by the people of widely diverse background and socioeconomic status. Along came the shift in the socio-cultural life and weakening of the sense of traditional community and its values. A typical highly fragmented suburban landscape was created – amorphous zone, wherein the fundamental transformation processes represent “inconclusive times in the urban dynamic”<sup>6</sup>. The pressure of new residents has not been accompanied by new economic activities, which has resulted in low growth rates of investment and employment. All these processes have caused blurring of the urban-rural distinction and eroding of the harmony between built environment and nature. This has brought new and different relations, since the city has always been strongly rooted in its agricultural hinterland. The western fringe of the city (both the suburbs of Veternik and Futog) is today characterized by loss of identity and continuity, disorganization of trafficking networks and modes, lack of infrastructure and public buildings/spaces, as well as lack of working places and many other necessary services. As Vockler remarked, the “informalisation of the cityscape” is a by-product of the large-scale deregulation that characterized all aspects of society at the time as a result of the lack or weak presence of institutional structures which made regulating building activity problematic<sup>7</sup>.

After the political changes in the year 2000, Republic of Serbia entered the process of economical and social transition, being defined as a process of changing within a state “from centrally planned to market economies and/or authoritarian regimes to democracies and/or nations economically and otherwise dominated by large multinational states to societies integrated into diverse international associations”<sup>8</sup>. However, the transition processes have been unequally successful across transition countries and to some transition has served more

<sup>5</sup> STANILOV, Kiril: Political Reform, economic development, and regional growth in post-socialist Europe. In STANILOV, Kiril (ed.): *The Post-socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe*. Dordrecht, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> ROSSI, Aldo: *The Architecture of the City*. Cambridge, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> VOCKLER, Kai: Balkanology and the Future of the European City. In: VOCKLER, Kai (ed.): *Balkanology – New Architecture and Urban Phenomena in South Eastern Europe SAM 06*. Basel, 2008, p. 10

<sup>8</sup> CHERP, Alex, VRBENSKY, Rastislav: Sustainability and transition: Synergies, opportunities and threats. In: *Development Policy Journal, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, 2002.

as an enemy to overwhole development, including sustainable. Transition also poses some threats and if certain institutional capacity is not in place to combat it, the transition period will unlikely alter progress to sustainable development<sup>9</sup>. The transition period weakens internal policies of health care, social safety, education, environmental protection and poverty alleviation as the governments start to lack financial resources<sup>10</sup>. When these processes were combined with post-war migrations and increase in urban population, they lead to illegal housing, as example of Novi Sad, and Republic of Serbia in general shows.

The transitional context in Novi Sad brought about new market opportunities, which were limited to the inner city, causing further imbalances between the city and its hinterland. This increased rural-urban migration as well as the volume of commuting, not only from the suburbs but from the neighboring municipalities and especially among working people and the students. As an outcome of this “new wave” of population pressure, spatial dispersion continued, but a new process also occurred. The specific densification of the city core-area was carried out without the proper housing policy resulting in illegal building, low quality architecture and the emergence of whole urban blocks of houses/apartments/rooms for rent. The building sector was able to offer high profits, which led to the privatization of the housing market. The conditions fueled the emergence of large real estate developers and builders that became one of the dominant forces in the city.

In the last couple of years urban planning and its mechanisms aspire to rise up to the challenges of the transitional process and the new demographic status of the city. The institutional actions planned for the areas “attacked” by informal housing are today limited to legalization of illegally-built individual houses. Although Republic of Serbia has put an enormous effort in building legal framework for legalizing illegally-built houses, there is still a great number of home owners that would rather face a possibility of penalty than collect all the necessary documents to legalize the house.

One of the key dialogue issues of today’s Serbian society and political structures is the question of land use and land ownership. Another item, as already stated above, is the process of economic transition that the Republic of Serbia has been facing in the last period. After large number of privatisation processes in the beginning of 21st century, the area of the land owned by the state (cities or Province) has been significantly reduced (this regards the agricultural as well as built or inbuilt sites). Through the privatisation process (where public ownership became private) the state budget has been filled for years. Finally, nowadays, Serbia is confronting an economic crisis with a very small number of companies owned by the state and a small amount of land that can be used as a building site. This also means that the capacity for another round of privatisation is rather poor and that the question of transferring agricultural land to building sites (in order to find other resources for funding local governments) is slowly appearing as a question. Since the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina is traditionally known as an agricultural region, it is clear that this kind of process strongly affects the primal discourse of economy, in a sense that is unsustainable. As stated by Berghauser Pont and Haupt, in the future food production will be characterized by increases in demand and necessity, so any general agricultural crisis is also difficult to apply as an argument in favour of transforming agricultural land into built landscapes.<sup>11</sup> The possible future growth of urbanized territory also raises other questions regarding sustainable development – environmental problems, fragmentations in the ecosystems, energy consumption and the relationship between capacity and the quality of space. It is also important to state that the process of “urban transition” in all of its components (demographic boom, economic transition, land use politics) involves all of the stakeholders of the society: citizens, private sector, but most of all, local and state governments that could not rise up to the challenge of accepting hundreds of thousands new inhabitants and still leading the urban and social politics in a sustainable and responsible way.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The central idea of this paper is that cities and especially their peripheral areas are mirrors of change in societies and that the spatial aspects of any social, political and demographic transformation should be studied

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<sup>9</sup> ARCHIBALD, Sandra, Banu, Luana, BOCHNIARZ, Zbigniew: Market liberalisation and sustainability in transition: Turning points and trends in central and Eastern Europe. In: Environmental Politics, Supplement 1, Issue 13, London, 2004, pp. 266–289.

<sup>10</sup> CHERP, Alex, VRBENSKY, Rastislav: Sustainability and transition: Synergies, opportunities and threats. In: Development Policy Journal, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2002.

<sup>11</sup> BERGHAUSER PONT, Meta, HAUPT, Per: Spacematrix – Space, Density and Urban Form, Rotterdam, 2010, p.72.



carefully. This presupposition was examined in the case-study of the city of Novi Sad that was transformed by decades of rapid change and still copes with major refiguring of urban and suburban landscape. A century ago Novi Sad was largely a provincial city rooted economically in its agricultural hinterland. Since the World War II the city of Novi Sad experienced 3 waves of population pressure and is nowadays struggling with difficulties that happened due to significant shift of economic, social, environmental and political circumstances. These conditions followed the wars on the territory of former Yugoslavia and the transition from a planned to a market economy.

Illegal houses built on the agricultural land are the key example of urban development during the 1990s and, in decreased amount, during the 2000s. Since they have appeared as the fast solution for something that was essentially a social issue (postwar migrations), it is hard to comment this phenomena only in land-use sense. Nevertheless, this initial need for shelter of the migrated population has induced city growth and a number of environmental, economic and social problems.

Process of transition after 2000 has revealed some new models of development in built environment demanding the diverse strategies for sustainable upgrade. The strong concentration of capital in the regional centres, followed by foreign and domestic investments, has initiated a new process of rather uncontrolled urbanisation. These transformations Vockler refers to as turbo urbanism and defines them as not so much a phenomenon of accelerated and excessive town planning owing to its somewhat questionable self-regulation and the lack of state control, but rather the result of a certain economic situation, because in the cities heavily destroyed or burdened by a high migrant population, the building sector was able to offer high profits.<sup>12</sup> With the arbitrary application of the existing legislation and the strong influence of construction developers' economic power, the quality of built environment has suffered on both urban and architectural level.

Resolving the question of land-use appears to be the first step towards the implementation of sustainable concept in Novi Sad. Since the master plan for Novi Sad provided the strategy based on „high density-low to medium rise” principle, it became clear that the result was, beside low energy efficiency and low architecture design quality of new buildings, the lack of green areas, other public facilities, and infrastructural corridors in general as well. This fact is the one that strongly influenced the capability of Novi Sad urban area to become sustainable. Unsustainable urban development at the city-edge will present its consequences in the years to come, while poor environmental performance of new constructions is already present. This stresses a necessity of producing new approaches to the development of the city that could be realized through strategic moves focusing on the reduction of the negative impacts of sprawl and city-growth while engaging in more sustainable land use planning.

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