



BRINGING THE POLITICAL TO THE CITY:

Politicising vs. Depoliticising Urban Transformation in Belgrade and Tirana

HEND ALY



4Cities Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree In Urban Studies (2017–19)

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Second Reader: Dr. Rosa María de la Fuente Fernández

MA Thesis (Date of submission: September 1, 2019)



for Fayza el-Nawawy

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ABSTRACT

Tirana and Belgrade's urban transformations have been central components of the Albanian and Serbian post-socialist transitions. Both cities underwent massive changes to mirror their countries' new identity. Megaprojects are an integral part of these processes. They are believed to foster economic growth, signify modernisation, liberalisation, and most importantly enhance city competitiveness.

Currently, the *Belgrade Waterfront* and the *New National Theatre* in Tirana represent the most crucial urban transformation projects in the two cities. They are large-scale mixed-use iconic architecture, located in the city centre, and planned as PPPs. The two projects are governed through a set of exclusionary frameworks of technocratic decisions and exceptional regulations. This catalysed new urban activism movements – *Don't let Belgrade D(r)own*, and the *Alliance for the Protection of the Theatre* – which contest depoliticising the urban.

The research foregrounds urban transformation in post-socialist Belgrade and Tirana through deconstructing the interplay between strategies and mechanisms developed by the state and urban activism movements around the two megaprojects. Hence, the study addresses the question of *how depoliticised urban transformation has been catalysed in post-socialist Tirana and Belgrade – and how do the new actors who emerge within this context engage with and challenge this state of depoliticisation?*

The research is mainly based on semi-structured interviews, observations, as well as documents and official statements analysis. This was conducted during fieldtrips to Belgrade and Tirana in winter 2018-2019 and summer 2019.

Keywords: New Urban Activism, Depoliticisation, Urban Transformation, Megaprojects, Tirana, Belgrade, Post-Socialist Transition

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Die städtischen Transformationen von Tirana und Belgrad sind zentrale Bestandteile der albanischen und serbischen postsozialistischen Übergangsprozesse. Beide Städte haben sich massiv verändert, um die neue Identität ihrer Länder widerzuspiegeln. Megaprojekte sind ein integraler Bestandteil dieser Prozesse. Sie sollen das Wirtschaftswachstum fördern, Modernisierung und Liberalisierung signalisieren und vor allem die Wettbewerbsfähigkeit der Städte verbessern.

Derzeit stellen *Belgrade Waterfront* und das *Neue Nationaltheater* in Tirana die wichtigsten städtischen Transformationsprojekte in den beiden Städten dar. Es handelt sich um groß dimensionierte, mischgenutzte, ikonische Architektur, die sich im Stadtzentrum befindet und als Öffentlich-private Partnerschaft umgesetzt wird. Die beiden Projekte werden durch eine Reihe von exkludierenden Frameworks aus technokratischen Entscheidungen und Ausnahmeregelungen gesteuert. Dies katalysierte neue urbane Aktivismus-Bewegungen – *Don't let Belgrade D(r)own* und die *Allianz für den Schutz des Theaters* –, die die Depolitisierung der Stadt bekämpfen.

Die Forschung rückt die urbane Transformation im postsozialistischen Belgrad und Tirana in den Vordergrund, indem sie das Zusammenspiel zwischen den vom Staat entwickelten Strategien und Mechanismen und den städtischen Aktivismusbewegungen rund um die beiden Megaprojekte dekonstruiert. Die Studie beschäftigt sich daher mit der Frage, *wie depolitisierte urbane Transformation im postsozialistischen Tirana und Belgrad befördert wurde und wie sich die neuen Akteure, die in diesem Kontext entstehen, mit diesem Zustand der Depolitisierung auseinandersetzen und ihn aufbrechen?*

Die Forschung basiert hauptsächlich auf semi-strukturierten Interviews, Beobachtungen sowie Dokumenten und Analysen offizieller Aussagen. Dies geschah bei Feld-Exkursionen nach Belgrad und Tirana im Winter 2018-2019 und Sommer 2019.

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The images on the cover are from Facebook pages of the NDB and the Alliance. The photo at the top shows a protest in front of the BWF sales office in April 2017. The picture was taken by Dragoljub Zamurovic. The photo at the bottom was taken during an attempt by the police in Tirana to clear the protest site at the theatre in July 2019. The photo was taken by Elona Caslli

All photos in the thesis from the NDB and Alliance Facebook pages are used with permission from the two movements.

INTRODUCTION

“Bringing the Political to the City” studies attempts of reviving the *Polis* in its Ancient Greek sense where the agora provided the space for citizens to practice democracy, discuss, debate and disagree. Such attempts emerge in cities where denial of choice and collective agency represent the basis of urban governance. The research looks at the interplay between strategies of denying and mechanisms of reinforcing collective agency over the urban in Belgrade and Tirana. It focuses on two megaprojects, as the locus where this interplay is situated within space and practiced in various forms.

Tirana and Belgrade’s urban transformations have been central components of the Albanian and Serbian post-socialist transitions. Both cities have been going through massive changes to mirror their countries’ new identity and image; imposing an interruption with the socialist past and joining the modern capitalist world. Megaprojects are integral part of the neoliberal urban transformation processes. They are believed to be drivers of economic transformation and signifiers of modernisation, liberalisation, and the new world city in the competition of places. This study provides analysis of megaprojects in Tirana and Belgrade not just as the physical manifestation of post-socialist transition towards democracy and open-market economy, but more importantly, as processes of urban transformation, where governance strategies as well as practices and discourses of different actors are situated in space.

The study focuses on two contested megaprojects, the *Belgrade Waterfront* (BWF) and the *New National Theatre* through which Belgrade and Tirana are pursuing urban development which aims at attracting investment, fostering economic growth and enhancing city competitiveness. Hence, the two projects are viewed as absolute necessity and are governed through a set of exclusionary frameworks of technocratic decisions and exceptional regulations. Within this context, new urban activism movements—*Don’t let Belgrade D(r)own* (NDB), and the *Alliance for the Protection of the Theatre* (the Alliance)—have emerged and formulated mechanisms to challenge and contest this depoliticised nature of urban transformation. The research draws on



Figure 1: Skanderbeg Square, one of the implemented megaprojects in Tirana. Source: Author, April 2018.

mechanisms, strategies and practices of depoliticisation and politicisation by the different actors, arguing that *the systematic depoliticisation of urban transformation leads to the emergence of new urban actors who challenge this state of depoliticisation and open the door for other imaginaries*. Conceptually, the research is based on the conceptions of depoliticisation within competitive authoritarian context,¹ new urban activism and the possibility of the political.

The selected projects are two among a large number of announced and planned urban megaprojects in Belgrade and Tirana over the last two decades. A broad range of megaprojects has been announced in Belgrade and they were even defined as “topics of priority” by the masterplan, such as Beko Master Plan, the City on Water, the Ada Bridge, the Beton Hall and the BWF. Except for the Ada Bridge and the BWF, none of the projects were realised. Importantly, these projects are iconic architecture which are meant to symbolise Belgrade’s European identity and express the neo-liberal trend in urban planning in Belgrade (Vukmirović 2015; Lazarević 2015).

In Tirana, the Bilbao effect is wished to be realised through the New National Theatre. Remarkably, it is not the first megaproject in the centre of the city, but it is part of wider transformations of the city centre which includes the extension of the central boulevard, *the Tower*, *4 Ever Green* and the *Eye of Tirana* mixed-use towers and *Skanderbeg Square* including underground parking. All these projects in Belgrade and

¹ The research categorises Serbia and Albania under competitive authoritarianism where democracy is reduced to elections, the concept is discussed as part of the conceptual framework in the next chapter.

Tirana were announced/implemented as a form of Public–Private Partnership (PPP), where national governments, political elites, developers and architects play an important role, and on the contrary city authorities and citizens have only minor or no influence.

As mentioned earlier, this research foregrounds urban transformation in post-socialist Belgrade and Tirana through deconstructing the interplay between strategies and mechanisms developed by the state and urban activism movements around the two megaprojects. Hence, the study addresses the question of *how depoliticised urban transformation has been catalysed in post-socialist Tirana and Belgrade – and how do the new actors who emerge within this context engage with and challenge this state of depoliticisation?*

The main research question, translates to five sub-questions:

- How is depoliticised urban transformation practiced within competitive authoritarianism?
- How do new urban activism movements emerge and develop – and how do they differ from the established political actors?
- How do they develop their mechanisms and engage with depoliticisation of urban transformation within competitive authoritarianism?
- Whether and how do they contribute to politicising urban transformation?
- How do established political actors react and interact with the new actors and their politicisation attempts?

Six hypotheses have been drawn to approach the proposed research question:

- Urban transformation, which is meant to be the physical manifestation of post-socialist transition towards democracy and open market economy, rather constitutes and roots authoritarianism and uncompetitive market dynamics.
- Depoliticisation of urban transformation is in itself an urban governance strategy.
- While consensus establishes the basis for depoliticisation within democracies, authoritarian practices are utilised to construct depoliticisation within competitive authoritarianism.

- As the emergence of new urban activism movements is catalysed by depoliticisation, they transcend focusing on resistance against specific megaprojects towards politicising the urban.
- New urban activism is characterised by how its actors formulate new imaginaries and construct new political spaces, where disagreeing is possible.
- Due to depoliticisation reinforced by competitive authoritarianism, new urban actors are lacking the tools of enforcement for their imaginaries and therefore shift their activism from the street to bringing change from within.

Methodology and Case Studies

In order to develop a deeper understanding and closer perspective on urban transformation in post-socialist Belgrade and Tirana, two megaprojects and two movements which developed against them were selected. BWF and the New Theatre represent the locus, where depoliticising practices and discourses of urban transformation, as well as mechanisms and practices of politicisation developed by NDB, and the Alliance, are being situated.

Figure 2: The National Theatre during a first visit in April 2018. Source: Author.



The research is mainly based on semi-structured interviews, observations, as well as documents and official statements analysis. Fieldwork was conducted during two fieldtrips in Belgrade in December 2018 and July 2019, and in Tirana in January 2019 and June 2019. Prior to the fieldtrips, expert interviews were conducted in order to develop a basic understanding of the dynamics on the ground and develop networks with the future participants. Over 30 interviews were conducted during the research period. The interviews were mainly conducted with members of NDB and the Alliance. Additionally, I have interviewed the Belgrade City Architect, a young architect in Belgrade's city council and an opposition Member of Parliament of Albania. In order to get a broader perspective on the movements, another set of interviews were conducted with participants who support the cause but are not part of the movements.



Figure 3: On the left, a view from the train coach entering Belgrade, on the BWF construction site during a visit in March 2018 when the railway was still functional. On the right, the abandoned railway station in July 2019. Source: Author.

In order to locate narratives within spaces, I visited the sites of the two megaprojects various times and went for a guided walk organised by a member of NDB to the BWF and its surroundings. Previously, I had visited the BWF gallery and sales office, located in the Geozavod building and I am on the emailing list of Eagle Hills to get updates on the development of the project. Moreover, during my two fieldtrips to Tirana, I have regularly attended the daily protests by the Alliance and one of the its

core member meetings during the political crisis in Albania.² In Belgrade, I visited the *Ministry of Space*,³ which originally hosted NDB, and later I visited NDB's new headquarter. Joining the daily protests and carrying out these visits allowed me to closely witness internal dynamics within the movements and develop a different perspective than the one provided by members' narratives.

Furthermore, the research includes analysis of official statements by different actors and a broad range of official documents, such as contracts, agreements, master plans, etc. as well as branding documents by involved developers and architects. Moreover, I have closely followed social media pages of the two movements and some state officials.

Lastly, due to the sensitivity of the two megaprojects, and the repressive actions by the state, especially in Serbia, all the interviews conducted with activists are confidential. The research guarantees the anonymity of the information provided by them. Hence, the activists are only referred to using their initials. For some especially sensitive cases, the initials are made up.

Outline

Chapter one provides the theoretical basis of the study, through reviewing a broad range of literature and presenting scholarly debates on urban transformation and political transition, megaprojects, as well as urban contestation. Then, it constructs the conceptual framework of the study, which is mainly based on the concepts of

² The political crisis started early this year, when German media Bild leaked recordings of current government members during the last national elections organising election fraud in order for the Socialist Party to win the elections. However, no charges were directed to them and they stayed in their positions. Since then, Democratic Party, opposition party, has been protesting. Moreover, opposition members of parliament resigned from the parliamentary seats, which meant that the National parliament since February 2019 is running without opposition (Taylor 2019a). Later, they boycott the 2019 city elections which took place end of last June.

³ According to the official Facebook page: Ministry of Space is a collective of architects and artists which was founded in 2011.

depoliticisation within competitive authoritarianism, new urban activism and the possibility of the political. Based on these theoretical insights and the data collected and analysed, the following three chapters present analysis on processes, practices and strategies of depoliticisation and politicisation of urban transformation. Chapter two focuses on introducing BWF and the New Theatre and provides analysis of depoliticisation strategies which constituted the basis for their governance. Chapter three and four shift the focus to NDB and the Alliance. First, chapter three introduces the two movements and analyses them using new urban activism features discussed in the conceptual framework. Then, chapter four focuses on their actions and mechanisms and addresses the question of whether and how they present a possibility of the political.

CHAPTER ONE:

LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter lays the groundwork for the study. It first reviews three streams of literature on urban transformation, megaprojects and urban contestation. Then, it conceptually frames the research using concepts of depoliticisation and urban governance within competitive authoritarianism and on the other hand, it looks at new urban activism and its potential to politicise the depoliticised.

Literature Review

The literature review maps three sets of studies, the first section engages with studies on urban transformation during political transitions and locates post-socialist transitions within this wider debate. Secondly, it presents the scholarly debate on urban megaproject, both in a global and post-socialist context. Finally, the review discusses studies on urban contestation in Central and Eastern European (CEE) cities, with a specific focus on Tirana and Belgrade.

I- Urban Transformation and Political Transition

One of the main functions of capital cities is being the symbol reflecting the identity as well as political, economic and cultural orientation of the nation-state. Thus, planning capital cities has attracted special attention within academia; providing an understanding of what differentiates a capital city from other cities (Gordon 2006), analysing various patterns of planning capital cities all around Europe (T. Hall 1997), as well as classifying capital cities based on their functions and characteristics (P. Hall 2006).

Studies on CEE capital cities have analysed urban continuity and change which reflect political transformation throughout various historical periods, during the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy (Makaš and Conley 2010), and

the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries including post-socialist transition (Doytchinov, Đukić, and Ioniță 2015). Studies on post-socialist transition tackle urbanism from various perspectives; Firstly, it is argued that there are various post-socialisms, and the specific nature of socialist as well as post-socialist city was questioned (Hirt, Ferencuhová, and Tuvikene 2016; Hirt 2013). Secondly, various writings have focused on concepts of neoliberalism and capitalism in studying the shift towards market economy and how has this affected the city (Golubchikov 2016; Berki 2014; Stanilov 2007). Chelcea and Druță (2016) go as far as arguing that “some of these [CEE] countries [are] ‘more’ capitalist than countries with longer capitalist traditions in Europe” (521).

Urban transformation in transitional periods has also been the focus of many studies on Belgrade and Tirana. Arandelovic et al. (2017) stress the importance of connecting political and urban changes in Belgrade from the nineteenth century until the post-socialist phase, arguing that the frequent political transitions have influenced Belgrade’s urban structure. Jovanovic (2008) focuses in his thesis on de-Ottomanisation of Belgrade as a strategy of constructing urban space and identity of the new national capital. While, LeNormand (2014) analyses Belgrade, the modern socialist capital of Tito. Conley (2010) shows how the lack of urban continuity affected the built environment. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, public buildings such as the parliament, boulevards, squares and huge parks were constructed, while grid lines replaced the crooked Ottoman streets. Then, with the emergence of Yugoslavia, Belgrade was supposed to reflect the new identity, symbolising unified South Slavs.

Studies on Belgrade’s post-socialist transition discuss, among other issues, the role of actors in urban planning and governance, processes of neoliberal urbanism, as well as changes which took place and their implications. The role and division of power among actors in the process of urban development is discussed extensively (Vujović and Petrović 2007; Arandelovic, Vukmirovic, and Samardzic 2017),⁴ while Slaev et al.

⁴ It was remarkably noted that citizens have almost no role in this process, beyond the illegal construction, which is similarly mentioned in studies on Tirana.

(2018) concentrate on the role of the market and regulating it. Other studies, focus on processes, such as constructing an image, and urban regeneration tools, specifically city branding (Lazarević 2015; Vukmirović 2015). Hirt (2009) presents the tendency towards commercialisation of the urban fabric and the change in residential patterns.

Similarly, urban discontinuity is discussed in the literature on Tirana's urban development. Since it was announced as the permanent capital of Albania in the 1920s, all efforts were directed to the centre to reflect the image of a representative European modern city which does not resemble the tradition of an Ottoman city. As symbolism matters, Kera shows that one of the first things which was erected announcing the end of the empire is the statue of Skanderbeg⁵ (2010). Various studies have looked at the change neoliberalism brought to the city during post-socialist transition. Nase and Ocakçi (2010) argue that neoliberalism affected the "social and spatial urban dimensions of the socialist city" (1854). Some studies tackle the change of the built environment. For instance, Dino, Griffiths and Karimi (2017) analyse the extreme shift from radical top-down urban planning to a radical bottom-up model, which was accompanied by "unregulated capitalism", while Pojani (2018) focuses on the massive changes of the centre's built environment. Commercialisation of the urban fabric was analysed through studying the spread of retail in centre and suburbs (Pojani 2011).

II- Scholarly Debates on Megaprojects

The previous section showed how the two cities underwent various urban transformations to symbolize and reflect the identity, ideology and orientation of each new political power. Megaprojects and iconic architecture have been central to these transitions. What makes megaprojects of the post-socialist era special, comparing to earlier projects, is that they do not merely play the role of signifiers which carry meanings, but also aim to drive economic growth, which is a global trend.

The critical position on megaprojects within academia has been driven, to a large extent, by the critique of neo-liberal urbanism and the shift to entrepreneurship in city

⁵ The national hero who fought against the Ottoman Empire.

governance. Of particular importance is the study by Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez (2012) analysing thirteen urban megaprojects in EU countries, in which they argued that such projects are "material expression" of "development rationale" which predominantly seek "generating future growth and for waging a competitive struggle to attract investment capital" (199). Generally, the study developed a critical view on megaprojects, as they represent a "primacy of project-based initiatives over regulatory plans and procedures" (225). They argue that although the projects included in the study are different, they are all representative of the shift from a social to a spatial definition of development, in which places rather than people are targeted. They have also mentioned that the projects are "inherently speculative" as they aim at producing rent. Moreover, such projects are based on "exceptional measures in planning and policy procedures" (195), and even authoritarian management. Additionally, they argue that although urban governance of such projects is network-oriented, they are still very selective and exclusionary. The study also points out that megaprojects are not well integrated in planning systems, but also often detached from the urban fabric. Importantly, they bypass local governance, with the state and investors being the leading actors. Fainstein's (2008) study has also underlined the risky and speculative nature of megaprojects, as well as the growth of the dominant role of investors in urban planning.

Various studies provide in depth analysis of the negative consequences of megaprojects. Lehrer and Laidley (2008) argue that megaprojects reinforce inequality and socioeconomic divisions in the society, favouring individuals benefits over collective benefits and commodifying public space. Importantly, complexity and uncertainty are argued to be integral components of decision-making processes of projects of such a scale (Salet, Bertolini, and Giezen 2013), and this complexity legitimizes depoliticizing megaprojects (Vento 2017). As well, Swyngedouw argued that such urban regeneration is framed within a consensual language, which aims at making it incontestable (2007). On the other hand, positive aspects have also been addressed; e.g. Bornstein (2010) has argued that although megaprojects aim at ambitious goals such as positioning the city within the global competition of places,

they are also satisfying local needs and corresponding to community benefits. However, she still acknowledged that the reception of such projects is accompanied by fear of gentrification, displacement and change of city's identity.

Megaprojects in Tirana and Belgrade are not in principle different from megaprojects developed in EU cities. Vukmirović (2015) has studied five announced urban megaprojects in the centre of Belgrade which are defined as "topics of priority" by the master plan. According to her, such projects symbolize Belgrade's European identity and express the neo-liberal trend in urban planning in Belgrade. Lazarević (2015), on the other hand, analyse urban branding of these projects providing that it is an important regeneration tool in neo-liberal urban planning of Belgrade. Although, Tirana also has a considerable number of megaprojects, they have received less attention within academia. However, some studies on urban redevelopment tackle specific aspects of megaprojects, such as competition calls which attracted international architecture offices and framed Tirana as a modern European city (Pojani 2015, 82–82). Moreover, Pojani (2018) studies the nature of public debates around megaprojects, arguing that they focus predominantly on aesthetic aspects and on presenting the projects as pathways to prosperity for the city. While other issues such as feasibility and consequences are completely excluded from public discussions (712).

Unlike Tirana's New National Theatre, BWF has been studied in academia. The literature took a very critical stand on the project. For instance, Grubbauer and Čamprag (2018) have described the project as "state-led regulatory capitalism and a manifestation of the post-political urban condition" as the space for political conflicts is foreclosed. In the meantime, protesting against the project is the only space to attempt politicising such urban planning processes (3, 16). Studies on the project deal with different aspects, such as analysing contractual strategies and modes of governance (Grubbauer and Čamprag 2018), engaging with architectural and environmental aspects (Kadijevic and Kovacevic 2016), studying the waterfront's

master plans 1922-2014 (Balubdžić 2017), as well as discussing potential consequences (Zeković, Maričić, and Vujošević 2018). Remarkably, although the studies conducted on BWF, approach it differently, all of them agree on being very critical.

III- Urban Contestation

While the last two sections discussed urban transformation, and the centrality of megaprojects in such urban planning processes, this section focuses on forms of urban contestation against these developments in CEE cities, through reviewing writings which address who develops urban contestation, in what form and under which analytical categories. It, lastly, includes literature on NDB, one of the two movements analysed by my study, and locates it in the wider debate on urban contestation.

Bitusíková (2015) criticises academic literature on CEE cities which focusses exclusively on formal organisations in studying urban activism. For him this leads to overlooking citizens' activism and grassroots movements (332). Similarly, Bilić and Stubbs (2015), in their study on post-Yugoslavia, criticize the so-called NGOisation, arguing that it "channels a wide range of initiatives into a singular organisational form". They are also critical to absence of studies of grassroots urbanism and aimed at filling this gap (120). On Albania, the dominance of NGOs is echoed by Sampson (1996). While Abitz (2006) shows that some form of urban contestation was developed by civil society against the construction of the Casino in the centre of Tirana. However, he is critical to the moral position civil society organisation adopted, and the positing of the state as "the the actor with the ultimate responsibility to create proper conditions for the citizens through city planning" (1).

On the other hand, some scholars such as Jacobsson (2015), rather, focus on riots, local protests, and citizen's day-to-day struggle, which form urban grassroots mobilisation. She argues that such urban grassroots emerge as a result of neoliberalism. Similarly, Bilić and Stubbs (2015) provide analysis on a "new wave of urban initiatives", whose emergence they connected to neoliberal urbanism. In their study they included the right to the city and LGBTQ activism. As well, Štiks (2015) theorise the emergence of

what he called “New Left” in post-Yugoslavia. He argues that the 2008 financial crisis opened the door to delegitimising neoliberalism and capitalism, which were previously dominant and unquestionable, by “series of events, movements, and actors”, advocating for participatory democracy, and against neoliberal transformation of their cities (135-37).

My study focusses on NDB in Serbia and the Alliance in Albania, which contested urban transformation in Belgrade and Tirana. NDB, unlike the Alliance, has been discussed by academic studies. It fits both Bilić and Stubbs conception of “new wave of urban initiatives”, as well as Štiks definition of “New Left”. Camprag (2019) includes the movement in his study on the BWF project, as a force of resistance. Importantly, he referred to NDB as a civic initiative and classified it as a grassroots movement. Matković and Ivković (2018) present NDB as an anti-neoliberal movement, and analysed it as part of the “New Left” emerging in Post-Yugoslav cities. Lastly, Pope (2016) focuses on their role in mobilizing against the evictions that took place in Savamala as part of the project preparation.

In conclusion, the review brought together three streams of academic debates; firstly, political transition and urban transformation; secondly, megaprojects as materialisation of neoliberal urbanism and democratic deficit; and thirdly emerging urban contestations against this neoliberal rationale dominating urban transformations. My study brings these three streams together, to provide an understanding of how the political – discussed further in the conceptual framework – in the city, is hindered/foreclosed by the rationale of urban transformation but also is reinforced by urban contestations. The study contributes to the growing literature on the emergence of new forms of activism and locates them within the urban transformation context which initially led to their emergence. Importantly, megaprojects are the locus where the interplay between the structures governing urban transformation and the emerging opposing activism, takes place.

Conceptual Framework

As the literature review has shown, various approaches and theoretical frameworks have been developed to study urban transformation and contestation. My research brings both sides together and addresses two theoretical questions, first, how to study depoliticisation in non-democracies? And the second one is how the new actors which emerge against depoliticisation can be defined?

I- Depoliticisation, Governance and Competitive Authoritarianism

Studies on depoliticisation, including writings on the post-political condition, have been developed to analyse democracies and the deficiencies of democratic rule. However, depoliticisation also takes place in less democratic contexts, as my study demonstrates.

Various concepts have been developed to analyse political systems in Western Balkans, such as semi-authoritarianism, semi-democracy, hybrid system, as well as competitive authoritarianism. In my study, I refer to it as competitive authoritarianism. According to Bieber (2018), in such regimes, democracy is being reduced to elections, and politics is being shaped through authoritarian practices such as media control, diminution of independent institutions, as well as enforcement of informal control by ruling parties over state administration. Moreover, he asserts that there are two main features of competitive authoritarianism, “institutional weakness [...] and authoritarian political actors who utilise these weaknesses to attain and retain power” (338).

I argue, that in such a context, authoritarian practices, are not sufficient in themselves in governing urban transformation, but they are also being utilised as tools of depoliticisation. For instance, law violations take place to exclude opposition/debate within democratic institutions, while participatory mechanisms get disabled to avoid public participation. At the meantime, an enforced consensus is being portrayed through controlled media, which takes depoliticisation a step further and reduces urban public debate to the economic and aesthetic dimensions.

One of the very important forms of depoliticisation is the conception of the post-political. According to Mouffe (2005), the political is defined by the antagonistic dimension which she considered as constitutive of human society. While politics is “a set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human co-existence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political.” The post-political emerges then when the political is reduced from politics, and as a result, politics turns to be a mere set of “technical moves and neutral procedures” – in other words, when democratic institutions provide space for only consensual politics, rather than representing a shared symbolic space for conflict among adversaries (9).

Swyngedouw (2007) has introduced what he called “the post-political city”. He argues that the shift of city government’s role from managerial to entrepreneurial which accompanied neo-liberalisation leads to the “foreclosure of the political.” This constitutes the post-political condition which is based on the replacement of conflict between different parties over power, to a collaboration between technocrats within a framework of universal consensus (4, 10). Swyngedouw adopts Žižek’s definition of the political. According to Žižek, the political is an act, a “moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space” (1999, cited in Swyngedouw 2007, 20).

As competitive authoritarian systems would rather bypass a democratic institution than investing in developing consensual politics, I argue that the post-political is not a precise reflection of the form of depoliticisation which takes place within these systems. Although Mouffe’s definition of the political and Swyngedouw’s conception of the possibility of the political remain insightful to the study, it follows the definition of Fawcett et al. (2017) of depoliticisation. Importantly, this concept as well was developed to study democratic deficiencies. However, it still provides a more flexible approach to depoliticisation, which remains applicable within competitive authoritarianism. Fawcett et al. (2017) assert that depoliticisation, in principle, is “the denial of the choice, agency, and deliberation that are necessary in any democratic

society.” While in practice it is defined as “a set of processes (tactics, strategies and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency and deliberation around a particular political issue.” Importantly, their definition considers discourse’s depoliticising effects (5–6). Similar to Swyngedouw, Fawcett et al. connect the emergence of depoliticisation to the shift from government to governance, i.e., from “top-down bureaucracy to networks and markets” (9). Moreover, depoliticisation leads to the denial of agency not only of citizens, but also of democratic institutions such as local governments (Griggs, Howarth, and Mackillop 2017).

Tirana and Belgrade have also shifted from city government to governance, in the sense that networks of public and private actors were formed, and participatory mechanisms were instituted. However, these networks were formed between top-level political actors and what they call in the Balkans context “tycoons”, those who have both economic and political power. Remarkably, these networks completely exclude ordinary citizens. Additionally, participatory mechanisms are predominantly procedural, which means that citizens are completely excluded from decision-making process. Hence, governance in both cities are as far as it can get from the ideal definition of urban governance. As demonstrated by next chapter, depoliticisation accompanied this shift to governance in Belgrade and Tirana.

Interestingly, studies on different forms of depoliticisation analysed its negative consequences including the emergence of religious and right-wing extremists (Mouffe 2005), anti-politics (Fawcett et al. 2017) and ultra-politics (Swyngedouw 2007). Violence, extremism and public refrainment from participation are anticipated as the dangerous consequences of depoliticisation by these scholars. However, Swyngedouw and Wilson (2015) in the post 2010-2011 period, started discussing another possibility; the possibility of re-politicising the depoliticised, through insurgent practices, such as massive protests and occupy movements. In such practices, they saw the political moment of disrupting the post-political condition. Although they have included insurgencies which took place in cities under

authoritarian rule such as Cairo and Tunis, their framework is still predominantly theorising for democracies. The next section discusses the possibility of the political which potentially arises with the emergence of a new actor in the urban realm.

II- New Urban Activism

My study, as well other studies, argues that depoliticising urban governance leads to the emergence of new actors who develop new ways of contesting this state of depoliticisation. They create new spaces, mechanisms and discourses to politicise urban governance. The conception of new urban activism frames my understanding of the new actors who emerged as a reaction to specific urban transformation projects in Tirana and Belgrade. This section of the theoretical framework discusses, what is urban activism and what is new about new urban activism? And whether it proposes a possibility of the political within the systematic depoliticisation of urban transformation.

There is no commonly used definition of urban activism, the literature has provided various definitions which deal with urban activism as collective actions and practices. For instance, Bitusíková (2015) defines urban activism as “collective actions oriented towards the city and its decision-making processes” (328). As well, Yip et al. (2018) define urban activism as “social practices of protest and claim-making about urban affairs” (6). Jacobsson (2015), rather, focused on the aim of the collective action, which is “challenging the present state of affairs by people with common purpose and solidarity” (6).

Urban activism has also been defined by its features. Jacobsson (2015) pointed out to a number of features including: firstly, they reflect a shift to the local, focusing on “micro-political processes in everyday life”, which strengthens their mobilisational capacity; secondly, they are heterogenous collectives in terms of the profiles of their members; thirdly, they are usually small-scale; and fourthly they adopt “playful and in-offensive ways” of challenging the status quo (9-15).

Importantly, urban activism has been defined in relation to urban social movements. Walliser (2013), for instance, has considered them as “new paradigm” of social movements (338). While Yip et al. (2018) focus on the scale, and intensity of contentious politics it produces, arguing that not every urban activism can form an urban social movement (6). Jacobsson (2015), on the other hand, argued that urban activism has “distinctive features”, which makes it not fit in either “old”, or “new” social movements, as they tackle social issues of old social movements, such as inequality, etc., using new social movements’ performance (8).

What then is “new” urban activism? The word new has been used to signify the emergence of unconventional actors in the city. Unlike old and new social movements, which emerged during different contexts (industrial and post-industrial) and did not address the same issues, there is no clear differentiation between “old” and “new” urban activism. Often, new urban activism is considered as evolution of social movements, rather than “old” urban activism, such as Walliser (2013). Consequently, “new” urban activism is not a 2.0 version of “old” urban activism, but “new” is rather an adjective or attribute.

Following the argument that “new” is an attribute, the next paragraphs show in which ways urban activism is depicted to be new within academic literature. Remarkably, most of the studies on urban activism, connect its emergence to capitalism and the dominance of neoliberal policies and practices within the urban realm, as well as the crises embedded in this system of accumulation, including Mayer (2013) on the Western world, Yip et al. (2018) on non-Western countries, Walliser (2013) and Velasco and de la Fuente (2016) on Spain, Štiks (2015) and Jacobsson (2015) on CEE countries, and Bilić and Stubbs (2015) on post-Yugoslavia. Although, all these studies tackle specific local urban activism movements, they all agree on linking their emergence to “glocal” neoliberal policies and practices in the city, as a global trend which is locally manifested.

Features of new urban activism movements were analysed in detail by some of these studies. Walliser (2013) listed some features such as: having a loose organisational structure, lacking formal links with established political organisations, being socially innovative, especially in terms of “knowledge generation” through “mass collaboration”, relaying on the use of ICTs, having “heterogeneous social and political composition” which is not based on social class, and having a “capacity to promote, network and function both by reacting to public administration, through bottom-up autonomous actions, and collaborating with it” (342). While Velasco and de la Fuente (2016) studied the new actors, who emerged after the crisis in Madrid and presented them as new urban activism. They asserted that they are new in the sense of “modifying demands, attitudes and subjectivities about how to produce urban space and interact with municipal authorities” (3).

Štikš (2015) refers to the new actors which emerged in post-2008 crisis in Post-Yugoslav cities as the ‘new left’. He defined them as “series of events, movements, and actors and not to a clearly distinct and organized political force.” According to him, they are characterised by being critical of reducing democracy to elections and of neo-liberal capitalist transformation of their cities, while they advocate for more direct and participatory democracy. They are also “spontaneous movements often erupt against general social injustices and concrete policies, expressing indignation without necessarily proclaiming a “leftist” agenda” (137). There is an obvious lack of analysis on what groups these movements together or what differentiates them from each other, as most of the studies rather focus on a specific city or geographical area. It is worth noting that some of these movements gathered and formed what they call *Fearless Cities*, which brings together “municipalist movements” from all around the world. It is composed of local movements which are engaged in urban politics and was initiated by *Barcelona en Comú* (Russell 2019). Although my study also focuses on two specific movements in one geographical region, I still believe that theoretical studies which categorise and analyse the emergence and development of new urban activism are needed.

Lastly, my research, brings the writings on depoliticisation closer to the emerging authorship on new urban activism by addressing the question of whether/how these new actors and new actions propose a possibility of the political within depoliticised politics of urban transformation. Swyngedouw and Wilson (2015) argue that despite all the insurgencies which took place in the 2010s, the “political remains foreclosed”. As a realisation that insurgent practices are not sufficient in themselves, they have posed the question of “what should be done?”. For that reason, they share thoughts about three political moments that follow or complement insurgencies to disrupt the foreclosure of the political. The first one revolves around acting-out, aiming at forming “new imaginaries”. While the second moment is dedicated to “redesigning the urban as a democratic political field of disagreement.” The third one deals with “traversing the fantasy of the elites” through having “the intellectual and political courage to imagine egalitarian democracies, the production of common values.” Shortly, only through forming new imaginaries, constructing political spaces and finally traversing elite’s fantasy, “insurgent practices can be turned into emancipatory transformation”, and disrupt the foreclosure of the political (222–24).

The discussed conceptions of depoliticisation and new urban activism frame the analysis provided by the following three chapters.

CHAPTER TWO:

DEPOLITICISING URBAN TRANSFORMATION

The BWF and Tirana's New Theatre are parts of bigger urban transformations of their cities. They both reflect new modern European identity and represent an interruption with the socialist past. Typically, the two projects are supposed to foster economic growth and enhance cities competitiveness. This transformation is fuelled by the urge to catch up with other cities, as due to political transition and war, the two cities were lagging behind. Hence, the projects are not just presented as an absolute necessity or trump cards but also as an incontestable and inevitable development of Belgrade and Tirana. This has shaped the processes of urban governance of the two projects.

As discussed earlier, megaprojects are an expression of project-based neoliberal urban development. They are also integral part of a global shift from managerialism towards entrepreneurship in city governance (Harvey 1989). It is also worth mentioning, that the problematic or even authoritarian nature of megaproject governance of BWF and the New Theatre is not exclusively due to specificities of the two cities, which do not have a long tradition of democracy. As the literature on megaprojects, discussed in the previous chapter, showed that even in the most democratic cities around the world, megaprojects are still very speculative, as well exceptionalism and secrecy represent fundamental features of their decision-making processes. The chapter, first, gives an overview of the BWF and the New Theatre, and then it provides analysis of depoliticisation strategies of urban transformation within the competitive authoritarian context of Belgrade and Tirana.

Projects' Overview

I- Belgrade Waterfront

The BWF is a \$3-billion brownfield urban renewal development. It is located in the centre of Belgrade, along the east bank of River Sava, in the Sava amphitheatre



Figure 4: BWF construction site. Source: Author, July 2019.

depression. The mega development occupies slightly over 2 million m². BWF is a joint venture between the Republic of Serbia, *Eagle Hills*, an Abu Dhabi-based private real estate investment and development company. The joint venture agreement was signed in April 2015 between the Republic of Serbia, *Belgrade Waterfront Capital Investment LLC*⁶, *Beograd Na Vodi D.O.O.*, and *Al Maabar International Investment LLC*. The first and the second are the shareholders in the third (shares are 32 percent and 68 percent, respectively), and the fourth is the guarantor. This means that the profit share of the investor is more than double of state's profit. More importantly, Mohamed Alabbar is the representor of the second shareholder (investor) and at the mean time the guarantor.⁷ Simply, Alabbar guarantees himself. Notably, Alabbar is also the chairman of *Emaar*, which developed the highest tower and the biggest mall in the world.

The project was first announced in the 2012-local elections, as part of the elections campaign of the *Serbia Progressive Party* (SNS) candidate. It was presented again in the 2014-parliamentary elections by SNS. The project was glorified through underlining its role in fostering the economy, attracting tourists and solving various socioeconomic problems, including unemployment (Cukic et al. 2015). The idea of

⁶ A daughter company of Eagle Hills.

⁷Joint Venture Agreement: The Belgrade Waterfront Project, is available on:

<https://www.slideshare.net/slobodandjukic988/jv-agreement-belgrade-waterfront-project-ugovor-o-zajednickom-ulaganju-u-projekat-beograd-na-vodi>.

developing the waterfront was not born in 2012. Already the 1972 General Plan included relocating transport infrastructure which was occupying the eastern bank of the Sava River, and disconnecting it from the urban fabric of the city. Only, in the 1980s, the construction of the new Railway station started, which is not completed until the moment. Later a public competition was organized to develop a master plan of the area. However, it was interrupted by the war – until the idea reappeared again in the 2012 elections (Kadijevic and Kovacevic 2016, 370).



Figure 5: On the left, the Geozavod building after it was converted into the BWF sales gallery. On the right, is the Bristol Hotel, across the road, which is also part of the BWF project. The sign says: homeless military of Serbia. Source: Author, July 2019.

BWF, as many other megaprojects around the world, is a spectacular architecture and mixed-use development. It encompasses the largest shopping mall in the Balkans, Serbia's tallest tower, Kula Belgrade which is designed by Chicago based Skidmore, Owings & Merrill Global (SOM), high-rise buildings, hotels, residential units, offices, etc. The project is currently under construction; however, some units are already occupied. On the other side, the project has displaced some residents, as forced evictions took place in the Savamala neighbourhood in 2015. The project has also displaced transport infrastructure, such as the railway which now passes under the city, and the main bus station. Moreover, according to the joint venture agreement, a number of monumental buildings became part of BWF, such as Geozavod, which was renovated and turned into the BWF gallery and sales office, the historical railway



Figure 6: The contrast between the historical building and the model. Sources: BIG official website & Author, June 2019.

station which was built in 1884, and it will be turned into a museum, the post office, and Bristol hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Belgrade and still hosts Yugoslav displaced army families who were “temporarily” settled there in early 1990s and are currently facing the threat of eviction (Nikolic 2018).

II- New National Theatre

In March 2018, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced a new modern theatre by a starchitect to replace the current National Theatre. Shortly after, the starchitect *Bjarke Ingels Group* (BIG) was named. According to BIG, the theatre will be built over 9300 m² in the centre of Tirana, and it is commissioned by *Fusha Sh.p.k.* BIG also claims that the project is in progress, although it was interrupted by protests, basically since it was announced. The project will be implemented as public-private partnership (PPP), as according to the government, public resources to renovate the building are insufficient. Fusha, the developer, is an Albania-based construction and real estate company. Importantly, the founder Shkëlqim Fusha is believed to have strong connections to the Socialist Party (SP). According to some estimates, Fusha. has made profits of at least €30-millions from projects for local government during the period 2015–2018, and Fusha was described as “almost exclusive contractor of Tirana municipality.” (Exit 2018)

The New Theatre is planned to replace the National Theatre, which was built in 1939 by *Pater-Costruzioni Edili Speciali* of Milano. Originally it was called *ex-Circolo Italo-*

Albanese Skanderbeg and was changed later to *Teatri Kombëtar* (National Theatre). The National Theatre was “one of the first buildings constructed by the Italian authorities to monumentalize the city of Tirana [...] It was a cultural and recreation centre with a pool, sports courts, a restaurant, a theatre and offices.” (Stigliano, Menghini, and Pashako 2012, 201) The building is composed of two wings, the first one hosts the National Theatre and the second one accommodates the National Experimental Theatre of Albania. It is considered as cultural heritage and it used to be on the list of protected monuments, until it was removed to make the way for the new development (Mali 2018).

The new development is designed by Copenhagen-based starchitect BIG. The Danish starchitect is involved in a large number of spectacles all around the world. BIG on its website, provide a basic description of the building:

“The theatre is conceived as two buildings connected by the main auditorium: one for the audience and one for the performers. Underneath, the theatre arches up from the ground creating an entrance canopy for the audience as well as for the performers, while opening a gateway to the new urban arcade beyond.”

Although BIG on its website only mentions the theatre-building, the project which was proposed by the developer and voted by the parliament states that the new theatre-building makes up only 40 percent of the development, while the remaining 60 percent is dedicated to commercial towers (Tirana Echo 2018; Çela and Erebara 2018). Bjarke Ingels, architect and founder of BIG, has briefly mentioned in an interview with Top Channel Albania (2018) that the project includes these towers, however without giving any further details.

Strategies of Depoliticisation

Depoliticisation is not merely a set of scattered actions, but rather strategies, which are not necessarily planned in advance but can evolve spontaneously based on the political context and public reception in a specific moment. Although the way depoliticisation is practiced makes it seem more like scattered actions, the analysis shows that such actions have an inherent logic which brings them together.

Consequently, analysing them as strategies rather than individual actions reveals patterns and deepens our understanding of depoliticisation. Importantly, these strategies are essentially analytical categories. This section engages with depoliticisation strategies in the context of governance processes surrounding the New Theatre and BWF, by analysing how they take place on the ground as tactics, and how these tactics translate into tools and actions. The study focuses on two strategies of depoliticisation; instituting exclusive decision-making processes and reducing the political in the public debate. Importantly, the analysis of depoliticisation strategies is based on Fawcett et al.'s (2017) definition of depoliticisation as “a set of processes (tactics, strategies and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency and deliberation around a particular political issue” (5).

STRATEGIES	TACTICS	TOOLS
Strategy I: Exclusive Decision Making	Disabling official participation mechanisms	Procedural
		Not public
	Enforcing state of exceptionalism	Legislative modifications
		Utilisation of Institutional Weakness
	Undermining critical voices (Repression, Divide and Rule)	Physical Violence, Threats connected to losing jobs, reputation
		Personalising the issue (distributing privileges)
Strategy II: Dominant Depoliticised Discourse	Glorifying the projects	Directing public debate towards aesthetic and economic aspects
	Inhibiting informed discourse	Intransparency
	Stressing technocratic nature	Underlining complexity and importance of expertise

Table 1: Strategies of Depoliticisation

Strategy I: Exclusive Decision-making

The first strategy aims at ensuring the exclusivity of decision-making processes. This does not just reduce engagement of citizens, but also limits the involvement of certain public democratic institutions and political actors. Three tactics were identified by the research, however, due to shortage of space, the analysis focuses only on the first two tactics.

One of the ways of excluding citizens from decision-making process is disabling official participation mechanisms. Albanian and Serbian laws state that public participation is obligatory within urban governance processes. However, in practice, participation mechanisms are not always in action. According to L.B., head of the Albanian Union of Architects and Urban Planners (AUA), public participation is obligatory by law, and it actually takes place in some of the local small-scale interventions, however, it is almost inexistent when it comes to megaprojects (Interview by author Jun 2019). Multiple participants, in Belgrade also argued that the problem is not connected to laws but rather application of the law and the political will, concerning public participation in urban planning.

Although disabling public participatory mechanisms was followed in both projects, the used tools varied. In Belgrade, public hearings took place in the city council.⁸ According to F.L., member of NDB, one of the very early public hearings, in which NDB attended was about amending the General Urban Plan of Belgrade to fit-in the project. The discussions went on for longer than six hours. All comments were rejected, except for the comment on the necessity of an architecture competition. However even that was not seriously considered, as according to F.L., the conclusion was: "Now if the developer wants to do a competition he can." Since then NDB started to deal with these public hearings in a less serious manner, as the members felt that they were not even heard (Interview by author Dec 2018). On the other hand, when I

⁸The process goes as follows, public hearings are announced, and citizens need to send complaints or comments prior to the sessions. Then, everybody can attend the session, but only those who sent comments can speak.

asked Milutin Folic, Belgrade's City Architect, about participatory mechanisms in the city, he mentioned new electronic mechanisms including:

"Website and applications, we just launched two more applications for communication with citizens, and I also have a lot of people that [...] come through Instagram they find my mail [...] lots of these photos and ideas and everything that I get, get processed, especially if it makes sense."

Adding, that it is his job to decide what suggestions make sense (Interview by author Dec 2018). Remarkably, he only mentioned tech platforms in which citizens can make suggestions, but cannot really get involved in decision-making, discuss and get informed.

In Tirana, public hearings did not even take place, instead several meetings were organised by the government. Mayor of Tirana called for two roundtables, which took place in Tirana Hotel and Plaza Tirana Hotel.⁹ According to A.T., an actress and active member in the alliance, the mayor was heading the meetings and the invitees were mainly artists. The meetings were organised mainly to show that there are artists who are pro and others against the destruction of the old theatre (Interview by author Jun 2019). Moreover, the invited artists said that "this invitation placed them in front of a set deal" (Tirana Times 2018).

Meetings in fancy hotels seem to be a pattern in Tirana's urban politics, as Tirana's general urban plan was announced in 2016, in one of these hotels, just two days before the adoption of the plan. This was considered as a legal violation, as the Albanian law states that the City Hall is obliged to publicly present the plan and ensure its accessibility for an informed public debate for at least one month, prior to the adoption. (Albanian Daily News 2016). The meetings on the theatre were similar. Moreover, A.K., member and political analyst, stated that in one of her attempts to attend a public hearing, she was told by the staff of the mayor that she cannot join stating that: "You cannot go to somebody's home without invitation" (Interview by author Jan 2019).

⁹ The fanciest hotels in the city.

The meetings can hardly be defined as public hearings, considering that they were based on invitation by the mayor and only the invitees could join. Generally, in all theatre related meetings, the government was inviting only artists. This shows how the government attempts to reduce the demolition from public issue to a specific group issue, which weakens and undermines the Alliance's position. In Belgrade, on the contrary, public hearings took place and they were more inclusive in terms of the attendees. However, they still, in Mouffe's (2005) thinking, did not provide a shared symbolic space for conflict among adversaries (52), where discussions, debates and disagreements happen, but rather represented mere procedural part of the decision-making process. Furthermore, public participation in Belgrade is largely limited to making suggestions, rather than discussing and objecting. Finally, both tools of exclusion show that the process is top-down, both symbolically and practically. The only way to have a voice is to be elected, otherwise your voice is either not heard or does not count.

The second tactic expands exclusion beyond citizens, to certain political/public institutions, and political actors. This was implemented by enforcing a state of exceptionalism concerning all related legislative issues, as well as utilizing the weakness of some democratic institutions. This required adopting special laws, tailored for these specific projects to avoid regular procedures and certain institutions. Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez (2012) based on their study on thirteen megaprojects in EU cities, concluded that "exceptionality is a fundamental feature" of governing megaprojects (225). However, regulatory procedures of the New Theatre and BWF take exceptionality to an unprecedented level.

Since the first day of announcing the New Theatre by Rama in March 2018, he declared that the project would not follow the regular legislative and institutional procedures, but rather it will be regulated by a special law passed by the national parliament. This contradicts Albanian law as this piece of public land is under the jurisdictions of the municipality, so only the Tirana Municipal Council has the right to expropriate it with a majority vote, which the SP cannot attain. In consequence, the national parliament,

with socialist majority, was given the role of expropriating the public land (van Gerven Oei 2018a; Rehova 2018).



Regjistri Elektronik për Njoftimet
dhe Konsultimet Publike

Projektligj (DRAFT) PËR PËRCAKTIMIN E PROCEDURËS SË VEÇANTË PËR NEGOCIMIN DHE LIDHJEN E KONTRATËS ME OBJEKT “PROJEKTIMIN DHE REALIZIMIN E PROJEKTIT URBAN DHE GODINËS SË RE TË TEATRIT KOMBËTAR”

Ministria e Kulturës

Postuar më: 08.06.2018

Figure 7: Draft law of the special procedure for the negotiation and contracting of “design and implementation of the urban project and the new national theatre”. Source: Albanian Government website.

Bypassing the municipal council was not the only exceptional measure, but rather the start of a whole process of exceptional legal procedures, which are mostly, unconstitutional. The Special Law was passed by the national parliament in July 2018.¹⁰ It served two purposes and represented two legal violations; firstly it stripped the municipality off its control over the land; and secondly, the law explicitly referred to the developer Fusha, which was selected without any public tender. Additionally, it formed a Negotiation Commission headed by the mayor, who also belongs to the SP, and composed of a number of ministers and a representative of the National Theatre. This commission was assigned the responsibility of negotiating and finalising the contract with the pre-determined developer. Later, in the same month, President Meta returned back the law to the parliament arguing that it contradicts the constitution.¹¹ Also, the European Commission criticised it due to lack of public tender (van Gerven Oei 2018b).

¹⁰ The Special Law is available in Albanian on: <http://konsultimipublik.gov.al/Konsultime/Detaje/62>.

¹¹ While President Ilir Meta is expected to be politically neutral, he is often seen as politically aligned with the Democratic Party. Additionally, the president according to the constitution can only return a law twice, after that the parliament can issue the law, if the Constitutional Court has not considered it as unconstitutional.



Figure 8: On the left Vučić and Alabbar visiting the BWF gallery. On the right, Ingles presents a model of his project in an Albanian talk show. Sources: Failed Architecture and Top Channel.

Two months later, the parliament amended the Special Law and passed it. In the updated version, Fusha was not explicitly mentioned as the developer anymore, while the commission was kept, but its function was amended to evaluating proposals submitted after the open-call. Importantly, the criteria of the call were to be set by the Council of Ministers, while the Commission had the final say over proposal selection. The updated version still did not grant any role to the Municipal Council. Not unexpectedly, Fusha won the tender. In June 2019, an official decision was published by the Council of Ministers which authorizes the Negotiation Commission to negotiate the contract with the developer. This was followed by a press conference, in which Rama justified and supported the Special Law and the demolition as the only way of developing this area (Exit 2019; Tirana Times 2019).

The law is not only special in terms of its content or even the public entity which issued it, but also the process of issuing it was exceptionally efficient and rapid. Importantly, the special law violated a number of laws and principles stated by the constitution. However, it cannot possibly be deemed unconstitutional during this period, as the Constitutional Court is paralyzed as a consequence of on-going judicial reforms. That is one of the main reasons why the process went very fast, as the law needed to be issued and the theatre will have to be demolished before the court starts functioning again. Rama has clearly stated in June 2019 that the theatre will be demolished and that “he couldn’t wait until the Constitutional Court is rendered functional” (Exit 2019).

In the case of BWF, state of exceptionalism was enforced from the very beginning. The project was initiated in an Agreement of Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and United Arab Emirates in February 2013, and it was ratified by the National Parliament in Serbia a month later. As international agreements supersede domestic laws once ratified, the new agreement bypasses a broad range of laws, including PPP and concessions laws. This step paved the way for bypassing regular legislative frameworks and some democratic institutions to concentrate power on the national level. For the sake of allowing the national government to monopolise decision-making, BWF was declared as a “Specially Designated Area” and the project was considered of national importance in May 2014. These two steps legitimised a series of exceptional frames that were created over the following year (Lalovic, Radosavljevic, and Djukanovic 2015, 39).

According to the Belgrade Master Plan 2021, which was issued in 2003, conducting international competitions was obligatory for urban planning. This hurdle was overcome by modifying the Master Plan in September 2014. Additionally, the updated version removed three other major obstacles, as it “allowed independent interventions on the spatial entity of the Sava riverbanks; enabled complete relocation of the existing railway infrastructure; made more flexible the restrictions of height and position of buildings on plots.” This was followed by issuing the Spatial Plan of BWF, which encompassed “development concept, planning documents”, etc. (Grubbauer and Čamprag 2018, 7,10). The state of exceptionalism expanded to redefining public interest to allow land expropriation in BWF. According to Serbian law, the state can expropriate land only in the case of developing public facilities. As BWF is a commercial and residential project, the law could not be applied on it. For that reason, in April 2015, one more obstacle was removed by issuing a Lex Specialis (Special Law) that confirmed the status of public interest to this specific private project and organised expropriation procedures (Grubbauer and Čamprag 2018, 11).

Moreover, all city authorities were excluded, and the national government carried all the responsibilities, S.D. a young architect in Belgrade’s City Council said that: “The BWF is closed and out of the regular city functioning, I do not know anything about

it. [...] Everything is so mysterious, even for us within the system” (Interview by author Dec 2018).

In both cities, the projects were initiated by the developer, while top-rank state officials devoted their efforts to remove all obstacles, being legislations or public institutions. All the efforts were devoted to fit the regulations to the projects, not the other way around, and to allow for monopolised decision-making. A broad range of institutions were excluded, including local councils and governments as well as city administrations, to avoid any potential of questioning the essence of the project, or even crippling and muddling the perfectly smooth pre-determined paths of the projects.

This is a realisation of all the features of competitive authoritarianism, which was discussed in the previous chapter, “weak institutions and authoritarian actors utilising this weakness to retain power.” In both cases, the very-top political figures, such as Rama PM of Albania and Aleksander Vučić, the Serbian President were heavily involved in initiating the projects and in removing all the possible obstacles through different means, practicing informal control over supposedly independent democratic institutions such as the national parliament to formalise, legalise and legitimise their personal decisions. T.Z. former member of NDB and architect explained:

“On the level of the city we have planning office and state level is the ministry, but the president is dealing like he is the only person who knows how thing should be done.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

Planning projects in the centre of the two cities based on exceptional regulations contributes to planning the city as fragments rather than as a whole (Harvey 1989; Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2012). This is particularly visible in BWF, as it is completely detached from the rest of the city morphologically but also practically in terms of transport system, for instance.

Strategy II: Dominant Depoliticised Discourse

While the first strategy focused on actions, the second one analyses discourses, arguing that both strategies are contributing to depoliticising the two urban transformation projects. This section provides analysis of depoliticising public discourse tactics, such as glorifying the projects and exaggerating their benefits, inhibiting informed discourse by making basic information contradictory and official documents inaccessible, and lastly, underlining the complex and technocratic nature of the projects.

Both Albanian and Serbian governments have aimed at glorifying the projects, through stressing how they will transform the city and bring economic prosperity. While the developers and starchitects have contributed to constructing this glorified image, especially through visualising this glory. The relevance of visualisation of the spectacle proved to be high, as they accompanied the first public presentations, both by Vučić, the then-presidential candidate, in Belgrade, and PM Rama in Tirana.

Eagle Hills is an Abu Dhabi-based private real estate investment and development company focused on high-growth international markets.

Eagle Hills develops large-scale flagship destinations in Serbia, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Our Mission is to be the global provider of quality lifestyle communities and leading iconic destinations in emerging countries, providing sustainable economic growth.

Our Vision is to become the world's most admired real estate company through developing integrated communities that provide smart innovation, high quality products and services.



Figure 9: Eagle Hills mission and vision. Source: BWF official website.

In Serbia, announcing megaprojects designed by starchitects during election campaigns has been a habit. BWF is no exception, as Vučić has promised an investment of \$4-billion to redevelop the Waterfront during his presidential campaign (Filipovic and El Baltaji 2014). Official discourse around BWF has focussed on its



Figure 10: Models of BWF presented in the sales office, showing the tallest tower in Serbia and the biggest mall in the Balkans. Source: Author, July 2019 & March 2018.

transformative capacity and its promised economic benefits. For instance, Vučić has stated in a press conference, that the project “will make Belgrade a regional centre and it will attract many tourists” (Reuters 2014). Eagle Hills, the developer of BWF promises “providing sustainable economic growth” to “emerging countries” as part of its corporate mission (belgradewaterfront.com). As well, Rama and Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj focused in their presentation of the New Theatre on its role in transforming the city to a creative city. This was expressed by Veliaj:

“BIG’s new theatre will become a crown-jewel of this transformation in the heart of the capital! The ‘bow tie’ will tie together artists, dreamers, talents and the aspirations of a city going on fifth gear yearning for constant change and place-making.” (As quoted by Myall 2018)

Interestingly, while the Albanian government stamped the project with the name of the architect, as Veliaj referred to it as “BIG’s new theatre”, the Serbian government has stamped its project with the name of its developer, Alabbar. Both of these stamps were meant to serve as immediate legitimisation of the projects.

This reduction of urban development to economic benefits and spectacle, has been echoed in various studies, specifically in Swyngedouw’s analysis of creative cities as post-political cities (2007). Moreover, glorifying specific projects in public discourse views the issue as black and white. Thus, any opposition to the project would be considered as against the greater good, urban development and economic growth. It

then aims at leaving no space for questioning the negative impact of the project, what kind of transformation it brings, if it is feasible, what financial risks the project entails for the city, what kind of identity it constitutes, and most importantly whether this is what the city actually needs.

These glorification attempts were accompanied with hindering any informed discourse, as the projects, specifically in their early stages, proved to be very non-transparent. Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez (2012) argued that the secrecy around megaprojects forestalls public discussions and any potential criticism. Additionally, this secrecy is usually justified by “commercial confidentiality” (214). This rationale can be seen in both cases; the New Theatre and BWF.

State officials, beyond the spectacle presentations, provided very distorted information on the project. In the case of the National Theatre, Kumbaro, the minister of culture, could not give basic answers to the parliament on the project plans, she said: “the legal authorities the one that will answer if the actual building of the theatre will be demolished or not. I cannot tell you this.” (Albanian Daily News 2018b) Moreover, some of the New Theatre-related official documents were made public only after *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* (BIRN) requested public accessibility. Similarly, the BWF contract is partially inaccessible, as some parts are considered business secrets, also the mayor has recently rejected to disclose a BWF contract that regulates the costs of the services performed on the construction site (Bjelotomic 2019). Furthermore, there are two versions of the contract, the Serbian one is considerably shorter than the English version.¹² In consequence, the public is not fully informed about public expenditure and the project’s financial plan.


On top of making important information publicly inaccessible, contradictory information was spread by different actors. For instance, while BIG stated clearly on the official website that the project is composed of only a new theatre. Ingels (2018) himself confirmed in an interview with Top Channel Albania, when asked if the

¹² The English version of the contract is the binding one.

project includes other buildings besides the theatre, that the project is composed of the new theatre and towers. He attempted to defuse public critique, saying:

“[This is] one of the concerns we have heard, [..] as if we are almost swallowing a theatre inside a tower or putting a tower on the top of the theatre... and I think we have kept it very clear that it might be a public-private partnership where the theatre is part of a larger project.”

While Ingels claimed that they—without really clarifying whom they is—stated clearly that the theatre is only one part of the project, his company’s official website, until today, only presents the theatre, and states very clearly that the new theatre will be standing on over 9000 m², which is almost the total area of the whole project. Moreover, Albanian officials and project documents declared that the theatre will occupy only 40 percent of the land, and the rest will be dedicated for commercial towers. The PM in one of the early presentations of the project, justified giving public land for private commercial buildings saying: “the private company will not make all the work for charity, but will have a space to build near the theatre” (Albanian Daily News 2018a). Importantly, the public does not have any information about the towers which will be built in the same complex with the theatre, except for one photo which was included in Rama’s early presentation of the project.



TANA

TIRANA NATIONAL THEATRE AND MASTERPLAN

TYPE:	COMMISSION
CLIENT:	FUSHA LLC
COLLABORATORS:	THEATRE PROJECTS, SON ENGINEERING & CONSTRUCTION
SIZE:	9300 M2
LOCATION:	TIRANA, ALBANIA
STATUS:	IN PROGRESS

The National Theatre of Albania is a 9,300 m² contemporary venue designed to host local and touring theatre companies in the nation's capital. Located in the cultural and administrative heart of downtown Tirana, adjacent to the iconic Skanderbeg square, the National Opera and the National Art Gallery, the cultural space will replace the existing theatre and add three new indoor performance spaces, a rooftop amphitheater as well as a covered public space underneath the building. Located prominently on the cultural axis and in a mostly pedestrian zone, BIG's design for the National Theatre of Albania seeks to reclaim and reinforce the city's goal for more urban gathering places in Tirana. The prism shaped volume is compressed and lifted in the center, creating connections and public plazas on both sides of the theatre at street level. Visitors and theatre enthusiasts can enter the building from either side or simply stay under the arch of the building and enjoy impromptu performances or other cultural events.

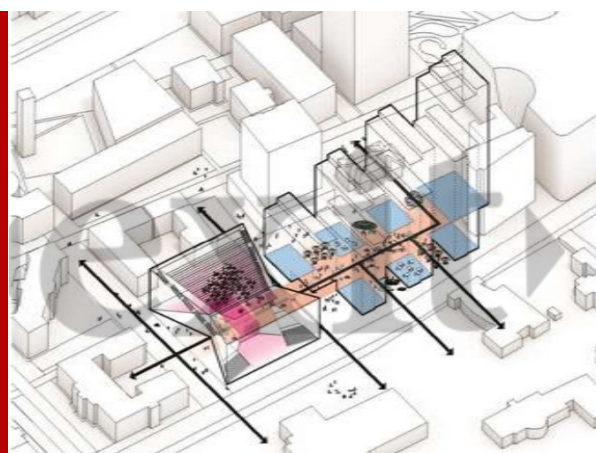


Figure 11: Contradictions between available information on the project. The description on BIG's website only mentions the theatre, while the project presented by Rama also includes multiple towers. Source: BIG website & Exit.

This was not the only problematic issue. In the same interview Ingels stated that he was invited by Rama and Veliaj when they came to power, to do the project. However, officially and according to BIG's website Fusha, the developer, is the client. This poses

questions on many claims Rama made. He initially declared that the project came as a proposal by Fusha, mainly to provide Tirana with a new theatre. Either way, the project did not follow any democratic procedures including conducting architecture competition. Ironically, BIG mentions, in the description of the building's transparent façade, that the design "makes public institutions more transparent". Apparently, the glass façades are the only transparent aspect of this project.

Lastly, generally, urban planning and development related decision-making processes, have been considered by officials as complex and technocratic. Folic, Belgrade's city architect described public reaction to turning some spaces in the centre to pedestrian areas, saying: "People are simply not..., you know, he is a doctor, he does not need to be an urban planner, he can't understand the end result until he sees it" (Interview by author Dec 2018). Folic believes that citizens lack the necessary technical knowledge, consequently, they are denied any form of agency over how their city should look like. Instead, this is the job of experts and technocrats. Rama has also viewed the whole project as a technical problem which needs technical solution by posting experts' opinions to social media to assert that the National Theatre building is technically unfixable (ABC News Albania 2019). On the other hand, he denied citizens the right to oppose the project by saying: "Who doesn't agree has all the respect but doesn't have mandate and rights to prevent it" (Shqiptarja 2019). Moreover, Rama focused on law organising the city, saying in reaction to attempts to stop the demolition of the theatre: "There is a will expressed in the law. You like it or not, the law is there to be implemented, not to be discussed" (Exit 2019). It is worth mentioning that the law was completely changed to fit the new development. So, it is rather the will of those elected than the will of law. Either because of law or technical expertise, urban developments are not up for discussion by citizens, but only for consumption.

Urban issues are viewed as technical problems which can only be solved by experts through technical solutions. This connects to the first strategy which analysed actions aiming to keep decision-making processes exclusive. Both Rama and Folic, in their statements insist that these are great projects for the city, and the only way of

developing the cities and the areas where they will be/are being built. There are no other options. Importantly, in both cities, the movements against the projects were described negatively. Folic in Belgrade said that the movement represents the destructive 5 percent while the rest of the population is constructive but not as active or loud. Rama echoed him by referring to those who protests against the demolition, saying: “No minority can take anything and anyone hostage in this country.” (Shqiptarja 2019). Furthermore, Veliaj called the Alliance members “liars” as they are merely protecting a “fascist building”, referring to the theatre (Meta 2018).

The actions of the first strategy were complimented by the discourses of the second strategy. Both actions and discourses aimed at dominating decision-making and public debate. Depoliticisation strategies showed that although, as mentioned earlier, they might look more like scattered actions than planned strategies, they were systematic towards their aims, hindering the political (as in debate and conflict among adversaries) from taking place.

Conclusion

Despite the differences between the two cases, in terms of the nature of the projects and the political regimes, parallels can be identified. Firstly, both projects are based on producing rent and closing the rent gap, as the land in both cases is perceived as wasted and has the potential to produce a better economic value through development. This is reflected in the highly speculative nature of the projects. Secondly, they are the realisation of the shift in urban development rationale from targeting people to targeting places, which was discussed in the literature review earlier. Thirdly, the two projects demonstrate how political elites are practicing informal control over weak political institutions and enforcing their own personal will. Additionally, they perceive city’s population as receivers or consumers of urban development, rather than as citizens who have a voice. In both cases depoliticisation – as denial of choice and agency – was enforced on citizens. This was even expanded to

public institutions and other political actors. And finally, it is important to keep in mind that although these two cases have their own specificities, they are still part of wider international trends.

With no doubt, most of the practices analysed in the chapter, are to some extent authoritarian; i.e. not respecting the rule of law, bypassing democratic institutions, prioritising investors' interest over public interest, humiliating critical voices and even being repressive. However, it is important to note, that these practices are not just aiming at dictating rule in its traditional sense, but rather to deny choice and collective agency under a cover of legal and public legitimacy.

Unlike within democracies, census was not constructed as the basis of depoliticisation, as the chapter showed, competitive authoritarian regimes would rather bypass democratic institutions and laws than investing in establishing consensus among political actors. Hence, consensus was replaced by authoritarian practices in the formation of depoliticised governance of urban transformation.

Lastly, the chapter showed how depoliticisation as a strategy of governance of urban transformation roots authoritarianism and uncompetitive market dynamics rather than reflecting the transition towards democracy and open market economy. The following chapters look at how these processes of depoliticisation lead to the emergence of a new actor, which to lesser or greater extent breaks away from traditional power structures and institutions, and formulates different demands, using new mechanisms and discourses.

CHAPTER THREE:

NEW(?) URBAN ACTIVISM

Depoliticised urban transformation, discussed in the last chapter has led to the emergence of new actors, who form unconventional collectives to oppose specific urban transformation projects, but also to challenge this state of depoliticisation enforced in their cities. This chapter as well as the next chapter provide analysis of the Alliance and NDB. It addresses the questions: who are these actors, what kind of collective are they constructing and what are their main aims? The next chapter develops the analysis further to how they pursue their aims and what kind of dynamics evolve between them and established political organisations and state/city authorities. First, the chapter briefly discusses urban activism in the two cities, and then it narrows down the focus to the Alliance and NDB, analysing them through the lens of features proposed by the literature on new urban activism. Lastly, the chapter, based on the analysis, argues that such movements are currently part of wider regional and international trends. Therefore, new theoretical frameworks are needed, so the analyses which are currently developed, based on the local specificities of each movement, can also transcend them to a more universal understanding of these newly emerging actors.

Urban Activism in Tirana & Belgrade

Urban activism is a relatively recent phenomena in post-socialist Tirana and Belgrade. Abitz (2006) and Bilić and Stubbs (2015) in their studies, showed the strong connection between civil society and activism in Tirana and Belgrade. Bilić and Stubbs, as discussed previously, described the NGOisation of activism. In the literature on activism during post-socialist transition, two movements are mentioned; *MJAFT* (Enough) in Tirana and *Otpor* (Resistance) in Belgrade. Both of them were formed in early 2000s by youth. Remarkably, neither of them initially had an urban focus. However, they had some urban interests: For instance, MJAFT resisted building a

Casino in the centre of Tirana. While Otpor eventually turned into an unpopular political party, MJAFT lost its activist character due to the personal and political ambitions of its co-founders. It is worth mentioning that the co-founder of MJAFT is Veliaj, the current mayor of Tirana (Zani 2016).¹³ The two cases show how institutionalising activism can potentially either lead to movements being co-opted by established political organisations or result in their irrelevance.

As discussed by the literature review, during the early period of post-socialist transition, activism was channelled through NGOs. Many institutions, and especially the European Union, prioritised building civil society as part of democratising post-socialist cities. This has changed over time by the emergence of new forms of activism which break with the NGOised form of activism. Bilić and Stubbs (2015) studied these new waves of urban activism in Belgrade, which were inspired by Lefebvre's right to the city as well as the writings of Harvey on the city and capital accumulation. They dealt with issues such as privatisation or what they called "legalised robbery" (124). In line with global trends, bike activism emerged in both Tirana and Belgrade (Kopf 2015; Interview by author with a Critical Mass member in Tirana Jan 2019). In addition, various protests took place to protect a number of public parks in Tirana in 2016–2017 (Tirana Times 2016; 2017). Remarkably, some of the activists which were engaged against the development project which took place in the national park, are currently active against the demolition of the National Theatre.

During the fieldtrips in Winter 2018/2019 and Summer 2019, the two cities were witnessing a huge number of protests. In Tirana in early 2019, there were protests against the new ring road, on environmental questions, etc. During the same period in Belgrade, urban issues were drowned out by pressing contestations by opposition parties against authoritarian state practices. Similarly, in Tirana, the mentioned issues were eventually overshadowed by protests caused by the problematic nature of the 2019–local elections. This shift in focus went hand-in-hand with the political space

¹³ Veliaj, together with some other MJAFT members formed a political party, which joined a coalition with the SP in the 2009-elections. In the 2015–local elections, he ran for the Mayor of Tirana as the SP candidate.

being taken over by more established organisations, specifically opposition parties – which was already the case in Belgrade since late 2018, after an opposition leader was badly beaten up in the street.

Aleanca për Mbrojtjen e Teatrit & Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd

Both movements initially erupted against specific urban development projects and evolved in different directions/forms over time. *Aleanca për mbrojtjen e teatrit*, translates to Alliance for the protection of the theatre (short: Alliance). *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (NDB) on the other hand has a double meaning due to the bracket in “da(vi)mo”: “We are not giving Belgrade away” and “Do not sink Belgrade” (Cukic et al. 2015). The common translation used by the movement is “Don’t let Belgrade d(r)own”. This name was developed during the protests against BWF, and it was kept afterwards by the movement.



Figure 12: Logos of the two movements. Source: Facebook pages of the movements.

The analysis of the Alliance and NDB is based on the features included in the studies which are discussed in the conceptual framework. I group these features under four categories: movements’ composition, structure, scope of interests, and links and relations with other political actors.

I- COMPOSTION	Heterogenous collectives (Jacobsson 2015; Walliser 2013)		
II-STRUCTURE	Loose organisational structures (Walliser 2013)	Spontaneous (Štiks 2015)	
	Not organised political forces (Štiks 2015)	Small-scale (Jacobsson 2015)	
III-SCOPE OF INTERESTS	Shift to local (Jacobsson 2015) Modifying demands and attitudes to pro- duction of urban space (Velasco and de la Fuente 2016)	Critical to the reduction of democracy to elections and neoliberal capitalist urban transformation (Štiks 2015)	Advocate for direct and more participatory democracy (Štiks 2015)
	Unnecessarily proclaiming “leftist” agenda (Štiks 2015)	Innovative in knowledge generation (Walliser 2013)	Erupt against social injustice and specific policies (Štiks 2015)
IV-LINKS & RELATIONS	Lacking formal links with established political organisations (Walliser 2013)		

Table 2: Features of New Urban Activism Movements



Figure 13: NDB's headquarter. Source: Author, July 2019.

I- Composition

The Alliance and NDB are remarkably different from each other in terms of composition and membership. Importantly, the composition of each of them has changed over time. NDB was spontaneously formed after a series of actions were taken by a group of individuals and organisations who were concerned with BWF. *Ministarstvo Prostora* (Ministry of Space)¹⁴ and *Ko Gradi Grad* (Who Builds the City)¹⁵ are two main organisations which initially brought people together and later supported NDB when it was formed. Until NDB was officially registered as NGO, Ministry of Space offered NDB with necessary office space, while Who Builds the City as a registered organisation, provided NDB with the legal framework to function. The composition of the initiators of NDB was defined by those whom Ministry of Space thought would be interested and could reach out to. This meant that a considerable number of the participants were architects, urban planners and scholars, etc. This has changed completely by the time public actions were taken, such as protests, as a broader range of people were attracted. This made NDB more heterogonous. The movement is mainly composed of highly educated young adults, the youngest is 21, while the oldest are in their early 40s. Their educational and professional backgrounds range between social sciences, education, business architecture, computer sciences, etc.

¹⁴ According to the official Facebook page: Ministry of Space is a collective of architects and artists which was founded in 2011. It is "monitoring and responding to" urban development in Belgrade through doing research, initiating interventions on the ground and supporting local social movements who are concerned with the same cause.

¹⁵ According to the official website: Is a platform which was established in Belgrade in 2010, in response to urban developments in Belgrade, characterized by corrupt and mismanaged privatisation of public resources, and clientelistic government behaviour, creating ground for monopolistic private sector actors. It is interested in opening up a dialogue and in citizens' involvement in defining a common urban interest in Belgrade and Serbia.

Actors, directors and artists were the first to react to the New National Theatre. They have tried publicising the project and their opposition to it. However, shortly after, their ranks started to split, as some of them changed position and supported the theatre's demolition. Later, a broader audience joined the cause. The co-founders opted to create the Alliance as separate and independent from any artists' unions or organisations, to steer clear from the splits and polarisation among them (A.K., Interview by author Jan 2019). The Alliance eventually managed to group artists, as well as activists, journalists, academics, writers and political analysts. This shift turned the New National Theatre, from a specific artists' concern to a public issue. Although the Alliance, from the very first moment, was not exclusively composed of artists and actors, its membership is still not diverse, as all the members are intellectuals who are 35+.

Shortly, NDB is clearly more heterogenous than the Alliance, which means it fits better with Jacobsson and Walliser analysis of urban activism. However, it is still mainly composed of young well-educated people, even if they are diverse in terms of their professions, social and education backgrounds. The intellectual composition of the Alliance may be partially due to the fact that, unlike NDB, it focuses on culture, identity, heritage and undemocratic decision-making in the city, but has not tackled issues which people face in their daily life, as discussed below in the third feature.

II- Structure

All the features mentioned by urban activism scholars on the structure, fit the two movements, they have loose/very horizontal organisational structures, they are not organised political forces, and they are small-scale movements. Importantly, both of them systematically tried to refrain from having a leader.

The Alliance's structure is even more loose in comparison with NDB. According to A.K., member and political analyst, the Alliance was founded by five members, and later it expanded to 15 members (Interview by author Jan 2019). Core members composed a WhatsApp group where they discuss and take decisions. In addition, they meet regularly after the daily evening public protests. L.K., member and writer,

mentioned that membership fluctuated at certain periods, as some members started being less active, and new members joined, but the core group stayed at 15 members for most of the time (Interview by author Jun 2019). The work distribution is based on personal skills, capacities and networks of each member; somebody is responsible for running the Facebook page, somebody else sets the stage for the daily protests, others collect signatures or write petitions and letters, etc. They have not developed a decision-making process. Decisions are taken rather spontaneously based on emerging needs, usually after extensive discussion. Some of their discussions get tense and disagreements take place, such as the meeting attended by the author during the election's crisis last June.



Figure 14: NDB's New Structure

NDB has also always been conscious about not having a leader. Until very recently, the movement had an extremely horizontal structure, in which most of the decisions were taken on the ground.¹⁶ However, the structure was brought up as one of the key issues of how the movement should develop after construction of BWF started and NDB failed to pass the election threshold to enter the city parliament in 2016. After a period of being inactive, core members decided to formalise the movement and to

¹⁶ Under the condition of following the principles set by the movement.

develop a leaderless but still less horizontal structure. In my second round of interviews in June 2019, multiple members mentioned that the extremely horizontal structure caused tiredness among them, and it was therefore necessary to define the structure and roles of each member more clearly. Importantly, this new structure is temporary, until the General Board votes on the final structure by next October.

The new structure kept some of the group's initial arrangement, such as the Municipal and Thematic Groups, and added some new units. Generally, the new structure aims at keeping power and responsibilities distributed horizontally, through a clear structure. Most of the work produced by NDB is done by the Thematic and the Municipal Groups, which focus on themes such as public space, environmental issues, education etc, as well as represent different geographical areas. Each of these groups elects a coordinator who represents the group within the Coordinators Collective. The Secretariat, which is currently composed of three members, is responsible for carrying out operative tasks, and is also represented in the Coordinators Collective. While the Advisory Board is composed of experts, professionals, intellectuals, etc., who do not have to be members of NDB, and they are invited by the coordinator of the board, who is a member of the Coordinators Collective. Finally, the Coordinators Collective elects three of its members to form the Ruling Board. This board is considered as the highest entity. However, all major decisions are taken on the level of the Coordinators Collective, in which all coordinators have one vote, including the members of the Ruling Board, and nobody has a veto. Less crucial decisions are taken directly within the individual Thematic and Municipal Groups. Internally, there is continuous pressure by some members, such as J.J. to keep the movement as "a space for free discussion and open dialogue" rather than an efficient decision-making machine (Interview by author Jul 2019).

The new structure shows the movement's attempts to overcome its loose structure, while avoiding to adopt traditional structures of established political organisations based on leadership. However, it seems to me that it will take some time to fully adapt the new structure as responsibilities still, to some extent, overlap. Additionally, the

loose characteristic of NDB translates to members' perception of the movement itself, as some of them refer to it as an initiative (original title), movement, organisation, etc.

III- Scope of Interests

Literature on new urban activism agreed that these movements have emerged as a reaction to neoliberal urbanism, and certain deficiencies related to democracy such as reducing the democratic process to elections and the dominance of consensual participatory mechanisms, unsuitable as avenues to make demands or voice dissent. This shaped their orientation towards local issues, enforcing new demands concerning the makeup of the city, and putting pressure to develop more participatory democracy, and gain collective agency.

Although NDB and the Alliance emerged against specific urban development projects, their scope of interest keeps growing, but into utterly different directions. They agree on the main aim, which is that "everybody should engage in politics", as stated by M.I., a member of NDB and marketing specialist. R.B., a member of the Alliance and famous film director, argued that everybody should practice democracy "because it is not a gift" (Interviews by the author Dec 2018; Jun 2019). This notion is also reflected by NDB's official website: "Our starting point is that all citizens' life issues are political by definition." And they listed a number of these issues, including having a job, a spot for kids in Kindergarten, getting adequate treatment when sick, time needed to wait for busses, etc. Shortly as M.I. stated: "If you don't want to deal with politics, don't worry, politics is going to deal with you." Although the movements were specific at first, it was clear for them that the problem transcends the projects themselves and lies in the dominating depoliticised rationale embedded in urban governance. That formed the basic philosophy to politicise the two projects.

The shift NDB witnessed from a single cause initiative to a wider scope movement happened as a natural development according to the interviewed members. They expressed that BWF was only a symbol of how everything else works in Belgrade. J.J., member of NDB and educational psychologist, said: "It was not a conscious decision, everything was going down, let's stop as many things as we can." (Interview by

author Jul 2019) Importantly, the issues NDB focuses on are not predetermined, but Thematic and Municipal Groups decide rather spontaneously on what to deal with, based on specialisations and interests of members, as well as the needs of the municipalities. The Thematic groups include gender equality, public spaces, education, health, environmental issues. The issues they deal with vary in terms of scale. They can be as small-scale as finding solutions for the lack of benches in a specific area. Solutions are always developed in cooperation with local communities. Other issues they have dealt with included fighting against closing down the last Children Libraries in the city, as well as replanting trees, which the city has cut, etc.

The Alliance is against the New National Theatre, but more broadly, is also critical to how democracy is practiced by those in power and therefore advocates for the importance of citizens' engagement in politics. They focused on cultural, heritage and identity issues in the city. They are critical to the limited share of culture in the city budget, but also to ignoring the existing theatre building and not maintaining it properly for decades. On the other hand, the members I have interviewed criticised the dominance of PPPs over urban development projects, arguing that this format prioritises private interest over public interest, as stated by L.K., member and writer, and furthermore results in loans which the citizens have to deal with for decades to come, as mentioned by K.C., member and former director of the National Theatre. While N.L., a famous actor, complained about the rapid development of the city centre, and the enforcement of new identity which is detached from the urban fabric but also from the story of the city, saying: "I do not recognise the city I grew up in anymore." (Interviews by author Jan 2019).

Unlike NDB, multiple members of the Alliance expressed in the interviews that it is a common belief among them that what brought them together is the protection of the theatre, and beyond it, nothing keeps them together, as they do not share common political views. However, the Alliance was still able to develop some political demands such as proposing amendments to the constitution. They agree on the need to develop a guarantee to confiscate any private development on public property and obliging the investor to compensate the city. The proposed amendments have also

included developing legal guarantees to public participation in decision-making and enforcing referendum as an obligatory measure in the case of public interest-related issues. The issues they tackle show how the Alliance brings new and unconventional demands to the political debate.

Indeed, the two movements are oriented towards the local rather than the national, in terms of issues they are concerned with. Moreover, both movements are facing non-transparent projects and city governments. As a consequence, they had to constantly seek and develop knowledge and play the role of the amplifier towards the rest of the society. According to them, this is the basis for having a say in city politics. Regarding proclaiming any type of agenda, the Alliance has never declared a specific ideology, and the members are diverse, some of them are socialist and others are liberals. Initially, NDB, especially during the protests against BWF had not defined its ideology, as the movement was in its early stage, but more importantly, the aim was to attract as many supporters from different spectrums against the project. However, later, the movement declared its leftist agenda. Shortly, NDB and the Alliance, and the other movements presented by previous literature on new urban activism, share a specific set of interests which revolve around rooting the local in the political.

IV- Connections and Disconnections

Links and relations which new urban activism movements develop with other established political organisations are decisive for their formation. In the literature on new urban activism, Walliser (2013) argued that such movements lack links with established political organisations. In this section, I bear Walliser's argument in mind while discussing connections and disconnections which NDB and the Alliance develop with other political actors.

Deciding on the relation with opposition parties is one of the biggest decisions, NDB and the Alliance had to take. NDB aimed at distancing itself from the opposition since it was formed, and over time the movement decided on the fields in which cooperation can be possible with the opposition. M.I. has pointed out that when NDB announced that it will participate in the 2018 elections, the opposition requested a

meeting to see the possibility of forming coalitions. The opposition proposed NDB a number of ministries, but the movement decided that they do not want to get into the City Assembly that way and turned down the proposal. J.J. elaborated further on what shapes their relationship to the opposition, saying: "NDB signed a memorandum of cooperation and decided to fight with the opposition for two things: fair elections and free media." The other members which I talked to made it very clear that they are not willing to cooperate or be counted on the opposition parties, M.B. said: "They are part of the problem," while J.B. called them "corrupt and disappointing." (interviews by author July 2019, Dec 2018) NDB aimed at distancing itself from the opposition, arguing that although they are currently not in full control, they are still reproducing and reinforcing traditional power relations. On the other hand, NDB aimed at getting close connections to similar small-scale local movements from all around Serbia, through forming the Civic Front.

On the contrary, the Alliance developed a strong connection to the opposition, while distancing itself from small-scale activism groups. Members of the Alliance were not sharing a unified position on what defines their relation to the opposition party. During my first fieldtrip to Tirana in January 2019, there were lots of different voices, with some opposing any cooperation with the Democratic Party (DP), arguing that it is as problematic as the SP. This tone against the opposition has changed in the second fieldtrip in June 2019. It shifted to justifying the cooperation. I had a long conversation with R.B. on the cooperation with the opposition. He is the strongest link between the Alliance and the DP, since he was active during students protest in the 1990s and one of the co-founders of the DP, but not active member until spring 2019. He pointed out that DP was initially involved in the project and even tried to negotiate with the Alliance. However, this position changed, since the political crisis started early this year, and Rama made it clear that the theatre will be demolished. The Alliance publicly supported the DP and joined its protests, while the DP promised to prevent the demolition. R.B. went further and argued that the Alliance's actions and discourse

influenced the DP and its philosophy, he described the meeting with the opposition leader Basha saying:

“We spoke about democracy in Albania, arts and protection of theatre, [...] leader of the opposition was very happy because from these ideas he decided to make a strategy how Albania will be in the next years.”

And he described the role, the Alliance is currently playing as “important because in a way it influenced the politicians.” The Alliance believes, according to R.B., that it has managed to change the morals of the second biggest party in Albania, and that the DP is supporting them only for moral reasons.

These ties were even further strengthened after the police raided the Theatre in July 2019. As the Alliance felt that the threat of demolition is approaching, they signed a declaration with Basha in the Theatre Square. The declaration is composed of a long list of commitments which the DP has to fulfil during a period of a month, once it comes to power. The declaration addressed three main issues, the first one is concerning the National Theatre, which included re-granting the Theatre and the surrounding historical area the status of a monument, to start the restoration process of all the historical buildings within this area, and to abolish the Special Law issued in 2018. The second commitment is connected to guaranteeing “functional democracy”, through legally ensuring the confiscation of all public properties which were granted to investors and forcing the investors to compensate for the damage they caused, and moreover taking legal and institutional decisions to ensure public participation in decision-making. They have also proposed amendments to the electoral law, to allow better representation. Lastly, they stated that discussions on all these issues should be transparent and inclusive. The third commitment proposed reforms on culture related legal frameworks and public spending.¹⁷

Importantly, this strong connection with the DP, caused a disconnection with other actors, such as *Organizata Politike* (OP).¹⁸ G.H., a member of OP, said that OP used to

¹⁷ See Appendix II.

¹⁸ Student’s organisation which was formed in 2011 after the shooting of four protesters in front of the PM office, when the DP was in power.

be involved in the protection of the theatre. However, when the Alliance decided to cooperate with the DP, the OP decided to end its cooperation with the Alliance, as OP's members argued that the "opposition is composed of criminals." She added "to believe that the opposition will support you, you have to be either naïve or to be seeking a personal interest." (interview by author Jun 2019)

Obviously, NDB, in terms of building its relations to other political actors, is more careful not to get co-opted by the traditional political establishment, than the Alliance. However, it is important to note that some of the members of the Alliance already had connections to political parties, which NDB completely lacked. Moreover, members of NDB are younger and most of them have no political experience, while the Alliance is mostly composed of intellectuals, and obviously they could not maintain the new format and pulled back to established and traditional power structures. Lastly, while the Alliance believe that they can change politics by changing the morals of one of the main players, exposing themselves to get consumed by a conflict over power, and the risk of being co-opted by one political party or smashed by the other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, features of new urban activism, developed by previous studies have not just provided a useful conceptual framework for the study of NDB and the Alliance, but also showed that new urban activism is an overarching analytical concept which can potentially provide more universal analysis of the new urban actors.

The composition, structure and scope of interests of NDB and the Alliance, show that in principle they are new actors, that form highly unconventional political entities within the city and formulate new demands embedded in local issues. This character differentiates them from already established political organisations in Serbia and Albania. However, the way they develop links to other political organisations, determines on whether they keep this challenging character or get co-opted by the

existing system. This also shows how challenging it is for new urban activism to sustain this “new” attribute, as they have to function within a traditional political establishment where their will to challenge it is not sufficient in itself. Importantly, analysing these connections and disconnections showed that while the opposition parties tend towards co-opting the new actors, the government alternates between ignoring undermining and repressing them.

Although the two movements approach the projects differently, they agree on the importance of changing citizens’ perception on their role but also their perspective on politicians being unaccountable and urban policies being incontestable. This translates also into the interest of the members, for their movements to internally provide a democratic space for discussions and debates for its members. Moreover, they signal the importance of the city as a political unit, by embedding their politics in the local.

As this chapter introduced NDB and the Alliance, through addressing who they are and what they are interested in, the next chapter approaches the question how they contest and challenge the state of depoliticisation enforced on urban transformation, and whether they really propose a possibility of the political.

CHAPTER FOUR:

POLITICISING THE DEPOLITICISED

“Everybody should engage in politics,” because “all aspects of our daily life are political,” and because “democracy is not a gift.” These statements were the answers by NDB and the Alliance members to my question what the main aim of your activism is. This chapter looks at how this main aim translates to actions. While the last chapter introduced the two urban activism movements, in terms of who they are, what brings them together, and what kind of collective they are forming. This chapter takes the analysis further to address the question of how they perform and practice their beliefs and ideas and pursue their goals. Moreover, the chapter locates them within the wider political context to see, on the one hand, how they define and delimit their relation to the established political actors and on the other hand, how these actors respond to the newcomers. Lastly, the chapter addresses the question of whether and how NDB and the Alliance open/raise any possibility of the political, based on the framework provided by Swyngedouw and Wilson.

Activism in Action

This section focuses on how NDB and the Alliance perform, what alternative spaces of expression and resistance have they developed, and what mechanisms are they depending on in challenging the projects and politicising governance of urban transformation.

Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own

Due to the scarcity and complexity of the information available on BWF, the first action taken by the collective which later formed NDB was to conduct a workshop, gathering those who are interested/concerned, to study and discuss the issue and prepare comments for the public hearing on amending the Belgrade General Urban Plan in 2014, which aimed to clear the way for the new development. This hearing

session represented an important turning point in the way NDB addresses the BWF, as the members realised that they were not heard. Therefore, the next public hearing session, they were also present, but participated differently. F.L., a member and architect, said:

“We decided to go [...] and try to stop it, because it is illegal it should not go through, that was the first time we used the duck and we called this operation Life-belt, because we presented ourselves as life-belts and ducks with beach equipment, singing, yelling, it was in the city parliament building we were like, dressed like this and behave like this.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

The Life-belt Operation aimed at undermining the procedural public hearings, as the public was meant to be “ignored [...] in this whole process”, so it was the public’s duty to find other channels to voice their concerns and have a real discussion on the project. Blocking the public hearing represented the first step towards the shift from engaging through official participatory mechanisms to resisting the whole process. This was accompanied by a shift of spaces as well, from the City Parliament to the street. This sarcastic, or as Jacobsson calls it “playful and in-offensive” ways of challenging the process and the project was outstanding, as it represents a completely new form of protesting and expression. The Yellow Duck stayed as the symbol of the movement, and the name they used during this protest was kept as the movement’s official name Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own. Protesting and mobilizing represent the main tools NDB has employed during the two following years 2015–2016. Moreover, in its quest for alternative spaces for expression, informing the public and developing discussions on the project, NDB printed a newspaper, as T.Z., former member and architect, explains:

“We were banned from every single media, so there was no space to criticise the project. In 2015, we decided to print our own newspaper and give to people for free, [...] two members were detained because they were giving this material.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

The year 2015 was full of fundamental legislative and practical steps towards implementing BWF. In April 2015, the Special Law was issued and the joint venture agreement between the Republic of Serbia and Alabbar (the investor) was signed, NDB protested on both occasions. The movement organised a protest in front of



Figure 15: NDB's duck facing off with security in front of the Parliament. Source: Facebook page of NDB.

Geozavod, where the agreement was signed. The police tried to make the protests less visible to the investor. M.I., member and marketing specialist, described it saying:

“Geozavod [...] has a small roundabout outside and the tram goes through the middle, and we showed up to protest, but we were not allowed to go in we were on the other side and police blocked us and when the Arab investor was going out of the building they stopped two trams to block the view with the protest.”

The explanation that was given later is that the trams broke down in front of Geozavod. As a reaction, According to M.I.:

“[NDB] took a huge bed sheet, draw a tram on it, spread it and whenever mayor shows up in public to give statements, they would go with the tram to block him from cameras, [saying] that trams broke down.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

The Yellow Duck reappeared in front of the National Parliament in the same month, during passing the Special Law. T.Z. explained that the Yellow Duck brought them attention and contributed to their publicity, as Vučić, the then PM, later in 2016 referred to NDB as “the people with a duck”, and that has massively increased their followers on social media.

Until April 2016, the protests were relatively small, usually a couple of thousands. Then the forced eviction and demolition of Hercegovačka Street in Savamala took place to clear up some land for the project.¹⁹ T.Z. says:

¹⁹ The evictions happened in the most controversial way, as masked men showed up in the night of the elections, evicted the residents and bulldozed the buildings. The residents claimed that the police did not respond to them. City authorities denied any responsibility. That issue stayed mysterious as nobody claimed responsibility and nobody was blamed for it (Dragojlo 2016).

“That was the point when people figured out that everything, we were talking about, was true, [...] we started organizing these massive protests, growing from a week to week. The first protest was like 5,000 people, the end of the year we had 30,000 people in the street.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

On top of organising mass protests, NDB took small actions to hold city authorities accountable. As M.B., a member and computer science student, explained that directly after the demolition, the mayor was not reachable by journalists, and he was not present in his office, as he was facing lots of pressures to elaborate on what happened in that night. For that, NDB decided to “go to the City Assembly in the morning, trying to find our mayor, to see if he is going to work or not, it would be 20-30 people and he would not appear.” (Interview by author Jul 2019)



Figure 16: Savamala, where eviction and destruction took place to make way for BWF. Currently some of the spaces are used as parking. Source: Author, March 2018 & July 2019.

These massive protests proved that NDB is capable of mobilising the public against the project, however this has also completely exhausted the movement. On the other hand, this success made the state shift its way of dealing with the movement from completely ignoring it, to reacting in the fiercest way. Core members were continuously threatened, personally or family members, of losing their jobs—especially those who work for state institutions. M.I. is facing accusations in four court cases related to his activism against the project, and his private company has lost most of its clients. They have also received life threats, some of them were even subject to physical violence. F.L. said that she was “completely paranoid in 2016.” As well, she explains how their reputations were targeted on the level of the movement but also personally, she said:

“If we are protesting asking for security and responsibility of what happened in our city, they say you are against the government you are against me so you are foreign mercenaries, and then they organized the whole campaign with the newspaper, that the big yellow duck is a foreign sponsored NGO connecting us to other people, then they put our names and later on they would even put our pictures to connect faces and names and then they organized some FB groups that would put our pictures there. [...] In 2 years, we have more than 50 complaints [issued to the police] for these online threats, nothing happened at all.” (Interview by author Dec 2018)

This pressure forced NDB into a stagnation phase, until they decided to participate in the 2018 City Assembly elections, as a citizens group.²⁰ This represented the second significant turning point, as NDB decided to go back to the City Parliament but not as citizens, rather as parliamentarians, competing over power. According to M.I. that was the only path remaining after all other ways were followed. Additionally, as T.Z. pointed, the success of other municipalist movements such as *Barcelona en Comú* and *Zagreb je naš*, encouraged NDB to take this step. A.P., member and master’s student, volunteered to Barcelona en Comú’s last elections campaign, as representative of NDB. This provided NDB with a close view on a successful case, which according to A.P. helps in preparing for the next municipal elections in Belgrade next April 2020.

NDB’s demands and fights during four years of activism preceding the 2018 elections, formed their campaign programme. According to their website, the programme “has been formulated through a wide range of discussions, which took place [...] in forums and local community spaces.” The main aim of the programme is to constitute “the principle of democratic city governance” through “uniting citizens in the fight for a solidarity city.” The list of issues included in the programme were diverse. As the screenshot shows, it ranged from local democracy, to public spaces, gender equality, kindergartens, environmental issues, animal rights, etc. The way of writing the programme was unconventional as it was based on discussions and debates, and it was decentralised as each member contributed by writing the issue which she/he is interested in or expert on. The programme was also composed of new and

²⁰ A legal category which allows a group of citizens to run for elections without forming a political party. The group dissolves once the elections or the term is over.

untraditional set of issues, which brings democratising urban politics and day-to-day issues to the core.

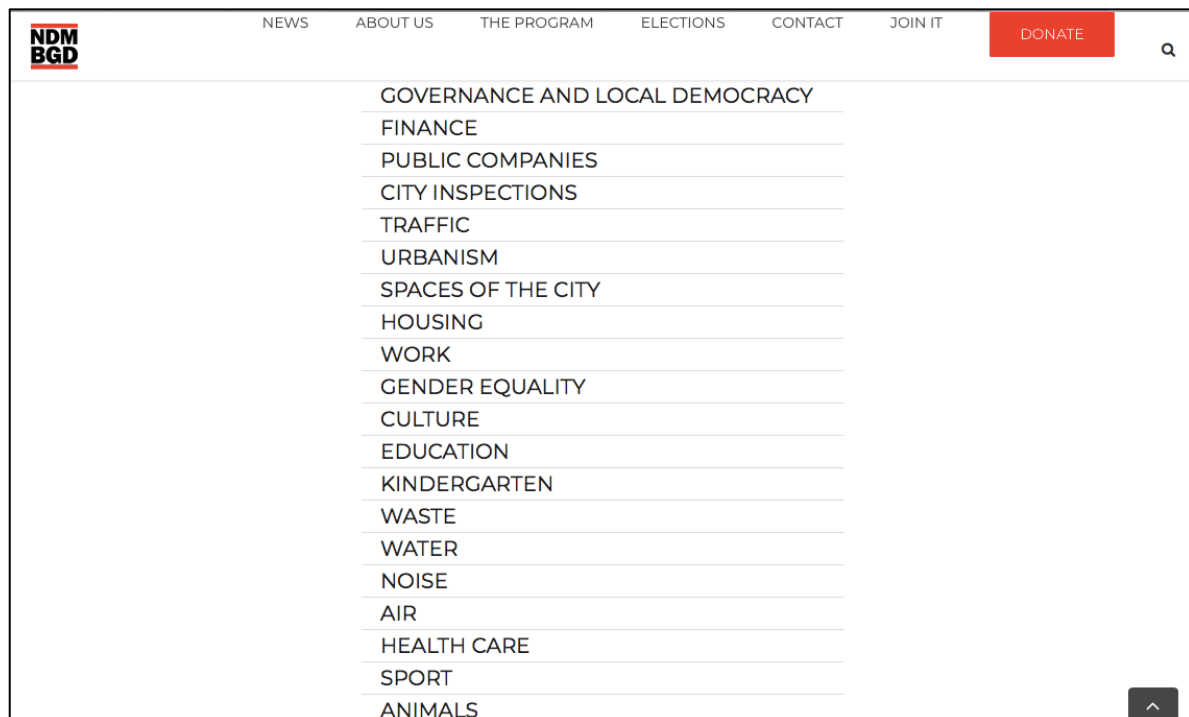


Figure 17: Website of NDB showing the electoral programme for the 2018 city elections.

NDB composed an electoral list which was gendered-balanced and headed by a female architect, Ksenija Radovanović. Adding one more layer of breaking with traditional ways of running for elections, the campaign was run in a horizontal way, according to J.J. member and education psychologist:

“The programme was written very good [...] in advance, what we did not have is action plan [...]. A political scientist developed very well for us who are our target group but for how to reach this target group we did not develop steps, flyers in mailboxes, door to door, each followed a different strategy, that was horizontal and all over the place. [...] When you are on the street and doing this persuasive exercise then you do it your own style, we could not uniform a rhetoric we did not even have time to align it.”

Although this could be partially due to their lack of experience and resources, it has shown the possibility of getting involved in politics without being part of the traditional political establishment. NDB collected slightly over 28,000 votes, around 3.4 percent of the votes, which was slightly under the 5 percent-electoral threshold for

parliamentary representation. Thus, they did not get any seats in this City Assembly. Nevertheless, it is important to note that thousands of people in the city wanted to be represented by NDB.

The elections were followed by another stagnation phase, until the core members decided to formalise and institutionalise, as discussed by the previous chapter. Formalising NDB and building a clear structure, I consider as the third fundamental turning point which shapes the movement. Furthermore, NDB is preparing for the next municipal elections, and it has formed a Civic Front with other local movements from all around Serbia. J.B., a sociology professor in Belgrade and activist in Niš,²¹ argued that these local movements have many things in common which can bring them together (Interview by author Dec 2018). Later in 2019, the Civic Front was formed, and internal discussions took place on the possibility of these small-scale local movements to run for the next national elections under the Civic Front umbrella.

The innovative ways of approaching voters will continue in the 2020 elections. For instance, according to A.P. and I.P., NDB decided to include Zvezdara municipality, as a considerable population voted for the movement in the last elections. Doing so, internal discussions with two members who live in the municipality were conducted to identify social issues and needs of the municipality as well as ways to approach its residents. The two members decided to start from the neighbourhood park which witnessed activism against a real estate development to replace it in the 1990s, but it stayed unmaintained since then (Interviews by author Jul 2019). Additionally, Municipal and Thematic Groups keep carrying out, as previously mentioned, small interventions in cooperation with local communities.

The discussed three main turning points show the shifts of the movement from engaging through participatory mechanisms, to resisting through mobilising and protesting, to finally competing through elections and aiming at bringing change from

²¹ Niš is the third biggest city in Serbia.

within. However, the three mechanisms are still taking place simultaneously, as M.B. explains:

“We are now combining three ways of fights, we are still doing the street fights, we have protests, whenever it is needed the second front is the institutional one, signing complaints and going to the court etc., and the third one is the parliament fight. These three have to go combined.”

NDB’s members did not perceive its change, as a shift of spaces from the street to the parliament, but rather practicing pressure on the system from different directions. M.I. called this “a leg in the street and a leg in the parliament.”, and M.B. explained:

“I do not think you can change just from outside of the system. I think you need to put pressure on it from different sides, it is not only the parliament fight, you need to stay on the street and file suits against them.” (Interview by author Jul 2019)

This explains the importance of the next elections for the movement and puts it on the same path like other new urban activism movements such as movements in Barcelona, Madrid and Zagreb.

Alliance for the Protection of the Theatre

The Alliance as well played the role of the amplifier for the rest of the society. As much as the state aimed at reducing the issue to the artists’ community, the Alliance pressured to make it public. Prior to forming the Alliance, artists were the first ones to react to the news of the new development, by asking for more information. As early as February 2018, over 70 Albanian artists signed a petition to urge the government not to demolish the National Theatre (Davies 2018). Later, the project was publicly announced by the PM in March, and the Alliance was formed by a diverse group of people including actors, directors, activists, university professor, journalists, etc. The two main mechanisms the Alliance relied on are petitions and protests. Like NDB, they have adopted playful and sarcastic ways of expression such as performing plays in public, etc. Most importantly, the Alliance formed the so-called Agora, in the Theatre Square, for everybody to come together, express themselves, discuss and debate.

The Alliance issued a range of petitions for the cause of saving the National Theatre building, among them a petition directed to the minister of culture. According to A.K. member and political analyst:

“We made a petition which was signed by more than 3,000 citizens physically speaking and we demanded the ministry of culture to regrant the statues to the monument as a protected building, but we got no answer.” (Interview by author Jan 2019)

Later in July 2018, the Alliance sent Ilir Meta, the Albanian President, petitions urging him not to approve the special law issued by the National Parliament. K.C. member and former director of the National Theatre, said:

“We sent him letters and petitions, both online and in paper, and it collected 7,000 signatures online and then 5,000 signatures on paper, with another petition with almost the same content but only signed by artists and performers which had 75 signatures.” (Interview by author Jan 2019)

The Alliance has also addressed international organisations such as the European Union multiple times, seeking international and regional pressure on the government. They sent a letter to inform the EU that the Special Law breaks EU’s Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Albania (E.G. Interview conducted by author Jan 2019).²² Recently, after the clashes between the protesters and the police last July, the Alliance addressed the EU Commission sending a letter which explains the situation and asks to hold the government accountable.²³

During issuing the Special Law, the Alliance organised two “massive protests”²⁴ (K.C. Interview by author Jan 2019), according to R.B. a member and famous film director:

“We made this protest in front of the parliament when they were passing the Special Law, it was 5,000, and when to push the president to push back the law we were 3,000.” (Interview by author Jan 2019)

The first protest took place in front of the National Parliament in July 2018, while the parliament was voting on the law. Lines from Shakespeare’s Hamlet were performed

²² The letter is available on: <https://www.facebook.com/mbroteatrin/photos/a.234554387103928/287372685155431/>.

²³ The letter is available on: <https://www.facebook.com/mbroteatrin/posts/477776609448370>

²⁴ The two protests were composed of couple of thousand people, however, they are still considered as massive, as they were the first protests which are not organised by a political party and managed to mobilise that number of protesters.



Figure 18: The Alliance's Agora. Source: Author, July 2019 & Facebook page of the Alliance, July 2019.

by the protesters. The message of these lines was directed to Rama as he would be “hoist with his own petard”²⁵ if the demolition took place (Koleka 2018). Later during the same month, the second protest was organised in front of the President Metas’ office to return back the law to the parliament, and actually Meta did not approve the law.

Originally, the Alliance started protesting against the demolition of the National Theatre in March 2018, however, from mid-June, the Alliance decided to hold daily protests in the Theatre Square, their “Agora”. A.T., a member and actress, said that the daily protests “began [...] in 15th of June, after a meeting with the mayor.” She said that the decision came prior to the meeting as the Alliance’s members agreed that their continuous presence would prevent the demolition (interview by author Jun 2019). Since the Alliance received rumours/news that the police will raid the Theatre to empty it in preparation for the demolition, it decided to organise a sit-in to be present all the time. On 24 July 2019, the police actually raided the square and clashed with the protesters. Throughout the day, the clashes escalated, some of the protesters were injured and the police used tear gas against them. Eventually the police managed to enter the theatre building but did not empty it as planned. In the evening the police

²⁵ This was a sentence in Hamlet Play, it started to be used later as a proverb on justice, which means that “Bomb-maker is blown up with his own bomb.”

retreated, and the protesters were chanting “down with the dictator” (Taylor 2019c; 2019b).²⁶ Occupying the square reflects the Alliance’s early belief that physical presence of the members and the public is very essential for the protection of the theatre.

The Agora was initiated as early as the protests started in March 2018, according to A.K.:

“Initially we started by making this agora once per week, we started in March because the law was not yet passed at the time, it was more like an idea, and during these weekly Agoras, which were made transparent for the public, we argued with civility and counterarguments and we did not foster the antagonism. I think it is the first protest that really went through making or setting an example of what was the government not doing, lack of institutions that operate, lack of public hearings that integrate the society.” (Interview by author Jan 2019)

R.B. elaborated more about the idea of the Agora, saying:

“A space for people to speak openly there because we do not have much space in the media, because it is manipulated by the government. This square must serve to open democracy, it is a microphone everybody can say whatever they want, [...] it was a therapy, a start of democracy that we needed, so now it is not only to protect the theatre but to protect democracy.” (Interview by author Jan 2019)

In my two fieldtrips to Tirana, I have regularly attended the daily protests. Although it is hard for an observer to confirm if the Agora is really that inclusive, I can say that it was inclusive to everybody who was present at the time. The Agora is taking place in the square between the two wings of the theatre, it has a stage and a mic, the audience surround the person holding the mic, and usually anybody asks for the mic gets it. The speaker position rotates fast among the protesters, although some of the core members speak almost every day.

Although, the Agora is arranged around a speaker and audience, the speaker can be interrupted and start discussing with the audience. Various topics are discussed there, besides the issue of the theatre, and the political issues which the Alliance has been

²⁶ Referring to Rama.

occupied with lately, due to the political crisis. For instance, one of the protests in late June 2019, gave the space for the “Egyptian Community”²⁷ to present and share their struggle against discrimination in Albania as a minority. The Agora has also provided a space for the students, during students protests against the Ministry of Education late 2018. During the daily protests, the Alliance showed movies and documentaries on uprisings, occupy movements and protests from all around the world. According to E.G., an activist, member and media professor in Tirana, the aim of showing these movies was to expose the public to what is happening around the world and assert that the public can and should have a role (Interview by author Jan 2019).

For almost a year and half, the Alliance attempted to challenge the new development and the whole process, independently. However, in July the Alliance signed an agreement with Lulzim Basha, opposition Leader and head of the DP, listing their demands, which the DP guarantees through signing the agreement. This happened days after the police raided the Theatre Square. Although, cooperation between the Alliance and the DP, started earlier in 2019, this agreement is a turning point from challenging the system in order to institute more direct and inclusive democracy and defend the theatre, to cooperating with one political power against the other, to keep the building standing.

The actions of NDB and the Alliance show that they have indeed opened new spaces for discussion and expression, proposed and pushed for new demands and formulated them in unconventional ways such as using a yellow duck or playing Hamlet to send their political messages. But most importantly, they pushed the two megaprojects and governance of urban transformation to the political debate and challenged the inevitability of this kind of urban transformation propagated by the Albanian and Serbian governments. The next section addresses the question of whether and how NDB and the Alliance represent a possibility of the political.

²⁷ Nomad group which settled in the Balkans long time ago. See also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkali_and_Balkan_Egyptians

Possibility of the Political (?)

Swyngedouw and Wilson (2015) argued that despite all the urban insurgencies which took place in post-2010 around the world, “the political remains foreclosed.” As presented in chapter one, Swyngedouw and Wilson’s thoughts on the moments which should take place to turn these insurgencies to “emancipatory transformation”, conceptually frame the practices of NDB and the Alliance as new urban activism movements. Doing so, allows to address the question of whether the new actors contribute by any means towards politicising the urban.

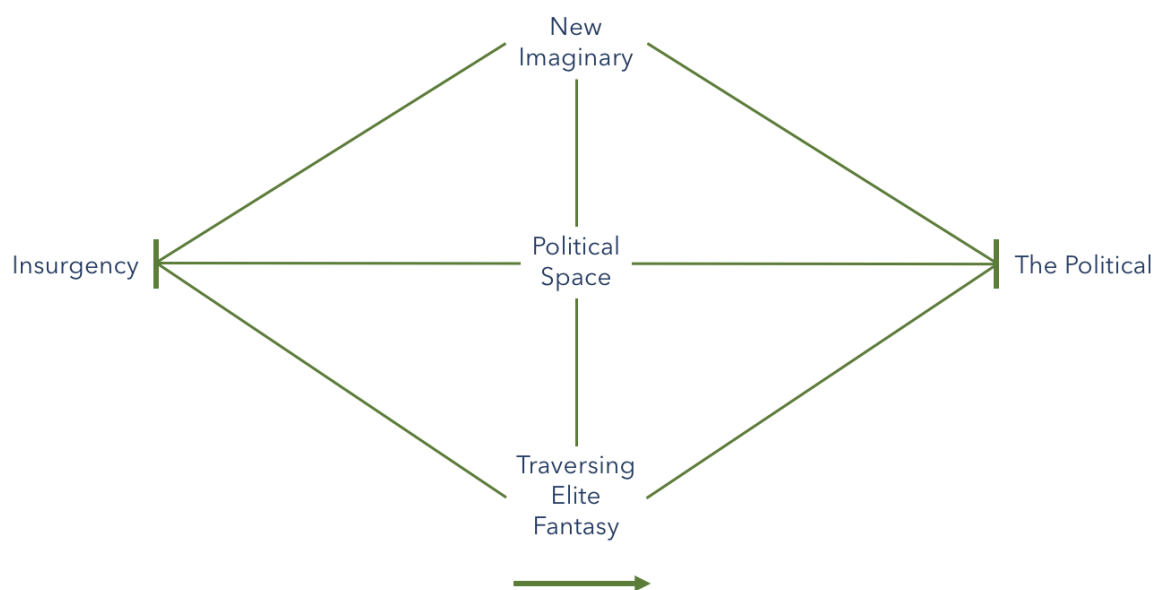


Figure 19: Swyngedouw and Wilson's Possibility of the Political

The study considers the massive protests organised by NDB and the Alliance, as the insurgency. Despite this unprecedented success in mobilising the public and getting them engaged in urban issues, the state of depoliticisation forced on urban transformation was shaken but not sufficiently disrupted. NDB and the Alliance have realised that as well, and developed their mechanisms, accordingly, hoping for challenging the system, enforcing different ideas and rhetoric and creating new spaces for expression and discussion. These practices are going to be analysed through the three moments Swyngedouw and Wilson suggested. It is important to note, the moments are strongly interrelated but do not necessarily come in a specific sequence.

Moment I: Forming New Imaginary

“Formation of new imaginaries and the resurrection of thought that has been censored, scripted out, suspended, and rendered obscene.” (222)

NDB and the Alliance showed the possibility of imagining the city in a different, and even contradictory way, than that enforced by the government. Moreover, they pushed the idea that “different politics is possible”, (M.I. and J.J., NDB members), and that politics is not exclusively for and by politicians (M.I.), but everybody should be involved and practice democracy (R.B., Alliance member). Importantly, they pushed issues such as urban transformation, urban governance and day-to-day concerns to the political debate. These issues had previously been completely excluded, and in the best case they were presented to the public *ex post facto* as achievements.

NDB systematically worked against the idea of politics being only a space for “professional” politicians. It tried to establish an example of how ordinary citizens can also be involved in politics and break the stereotype of politicians as serious men, dressed in suits, powerful and well-networked. J.J. described creating a new image, saying:

“I think we should always appear differently, dress the way we are dressed in our private lives. That is very important to create the image that different type of politics is possible and people who are not wearing suits really know something about politics. It is a process.”

NDB’s and the Alliance’s new imaginaries of their cities and of a different politics, discredit and delegitimise the assertion that urban transformation is inevitable and only possible in the way it is being done. This shifted public discourse to questions such as what the city actually needs and how and who to pursue it. I argue that their demands, discussed in this and the previous chapter, construct their imaginary, which in its essence challenges the supremacy of the enforced “elite fantasy”.

Remarkably, both movements initially focused their efforts on posing an external challenge to the political system through protesting, etc. Overtime, they realised that this is not enough to cause change and shifted to also seeking bringing change from

within. NDB decided to do so through being represented in the parliament, while the Alliance believed that this could be achieved through changing the morals and beliefs of the main opposition party, which is one of the main architects of this state of depoliticisation. Although the mean is different and its embedded risks also differ, they both aim at transferring this new imaginary from the street to the parliament and government. NDB, like many other new urban activism actors, has no clear vision on what to do once they manage to win any seats in the parliament. While NDB has problems in translating this imaginary to practical steps due to having endless variables, the Alliance has an extremely idealistic view on politics and politicians, which is to a great extent detached from reality, and exposes the Alliance to co-optation by the DP and possibly even complete dissolution.

Moment II: Constructing Political Space

"The second moment of reclaiming the polis revolves around re-centring/ redesigning the urban as a democratic political field of disagreement." (223)

As democratic institutions in the two cities, intentionally and systematically, lacked any spaces for discussing, arguing and disagreeing, as discussed in the chapter two, the first thing NDB and the Alliance tried to do is to construct alternative public space. Due to the secrecy and the complexity of the projects, the movements had to play the role of the amplifier and the informant, by seeking the information, and sharing it with the rest of the society to form the basis of informed public debate and engagement.

The Agora was invented by the Alliance to serve the role of the political space. Which Swyngedouw and Wilson defined as:

"The collective or common space for the institutionalization of equality as the foundational gesture of political democracy." (223)

The main aim of the Agora according to the Alliance, is to practice democracy which could not be practiced within democratic institutions. A.K. called it: "setting an example of what was the government not doing." While NDB did not offer such a symbolic and material space, from the very first day, the workshops and local community meetings they organise, unlike public hearings, offer the space for everybody to speak out and disagree.

It is hard for an outside observer to confirm that the movements are internally representing political spaces. I have attended one of the Alliance meetings in June, where the members were taking an important decision, and they disagreed, but everybody was still able to express themselves. In the case of NDB, some of the members, including J.J., mentioned that they are continuously trying to sustain the movement as the space for discussion and debate, and as much as possible save it from turning to be merely a decision-making machine.

Moment III: Traversing Elite Fantasies

“Third, and most importantly, the transmutation of insurgency into a political sequence poses the need to traverse the fantasy of the elites.” (223)

It is possible to see the formation of a new imaginary which contradicts the enforced elite fantasies in making-up and governing the city, as well as the symbolic and material construction of political spaces by NDB and the Alliance. Unfortunately, this unnecessarily means or leads to traversing elite fantasies, 1) materially, as the BWF is partly constructed and the theatre can still possibly be demolished, neither 2) policy-wise, because none of the imaginaries turned to policies and regulations, and nor 3) institutionally, as political spaces and democratic institutions are still mutually exclusive. However, that does not mean the new imaginaries and the political spaces are irrelevant. The mere existence of these imaginaries and spaces demonstrates their possibility and challenges the supremacy and dominance of elite fantasies, although not traversing them.

Based on this analysis, these movements can possibly be the actors who bring the possibility of the political. However, other possibilities still exist, such as being crushed or co-opted by other political actors. While it is difficult to predict their future and the extent of their impact, they have claimed an agency in urban politics in both cities. With no doubt, they have opened the door for new possibilities and invented and occupied political spaces. Importantly, they invent and impose the possibility of bringing people together in public space to discuss and construct a new imaginary for their cities. They have also delegitimised the dominance of established traditional

political actors over politics by including a broad range of social segments which were never politically engaged.

Most importantly, activism is a cumulative process, not instant victories. Impact of activism is not only direct. In other words, activism against the real estate development which replaced the national park in Tirana, has completely failed in stopping the project, but also in sustaining and institutionalising the collective which stood against it. Nevertheless, the network it created and ideas it constructed later contributed to activism against the demolition of the National Theatre. Moreover, impact does not have to be limited to one place, as urban activism in Barcelona and Zagreb contributed to urban activism in Belgrade, through passing on experience and knowledge. Even if the Alliance and NDB eventually disappear, the practices and spaces they created will reverberate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the chapter has analysed practices and mechanisms developed by NDB and the Alliance as urban activism movements emerging within a context of competitive authoritarianism, which systematically depoliticises urban governance and transformation. NDB and the Alliance, since their formation, played the role of the amplifier towards the rest of the society, and the challenger of depoliticisation against the state. In this chapter, I have argued that in many aspects their practices and mechanisms indeed delegitimise the dominance and the supremacy of the elite fantasy. However, the question, which the second section posed, was, can practices and mechanisms developed by the two movements turn them from insurgencies to emancipatory transformations. The chapter concludes that the two movements contributed to forming new imaginaries which challenge the dominance of elite fantasies and constructing new political spaces where imagining and disagreeing take place. Nevertheless, these imaginaries and spaces could not replace technocratic spaces which exclude any kind of disagreement, and deal with urban issues as technical problems which need technical solutions. As these imaginaries and spaces

have not made it to the democratic institutions yet, the change they brought is not material. It has not transformed to the built environment, policy, or institutions. However, this does not negate their existence, and does not reduce their impact, as the imaginaries they created and the spaces they invented are necessary to traverse elite fantasies. Even if such imaginaries, unlike the fantasies, currently lack enforcing mechanisms, they still exist thanks to urban activism.

CONCLUSION

The study provided close-up views on dynamics of urban transformation in post-socialist Belgrade and Tirana. As complex as urban transformation processes are, they represent a stage where governance strategies and contestation mechanisms interplay. Through focusing on the BWF and Tirana's New Theatre, as the locus where this interplay is taking place, I have first analysed how depoliticisation of the two megaprojects is formulated as strategies rather than scattered actions and showed how these strategies institute exclusive decision-making and construct a dominant depoliticised discourse. Secondly, I looked at how this state of depoliticisation led to the emergence of new urban actors and catalysed new urban activism in Belgrade and Tirana. The study presented NDB, and the Alliance as new urban activism movements which formulated new imaginaries and constructed political spaces to challenge this state of depoliticisation.

Concepts of depoliticisation, new urban activism and the possibility of the political provided the theoretical basis for the study. The concept of depoliticisation is developed by scholars mainly to analyse democracies and deficiencies of democratic governance. However, the study argued that depoliticisation is also practiced in less democratic contexts, as competitive authoritarian regimes in Belgrade and Tirana demonstrate. Hence, depoliticisation, as strategies of denying choice and collective agency, was employed by the study to theoretically frame depoliticisation practices and discourses of urban transformation in Belgrade and Tirana. On the other hand, features of new urban activism movements developed by academic literature, were categorised and provided the theoretical basis for the analysis of NDB and the Alliance. This proves that it is the time to develop a theoretical framework which helps scholars to approach new urban actors. Lastly, Swyngedouw and Wilson's thoughts on the three necessary moments for turning insurgencies to emancipatory transformations, framed the interplay between depoliticisation strategies and politicisation mechanisms to address the question of whether and how these movements contribute to politicising the depoliticised.

The thesis' main argument states that systematic depoliticisation of urban transformation leads to the emergence of new urban actors who challenge this state of depoliticisation and open the door for other imaginaries. The next few paragraphs engage with this argument and the hypotheses which are driven from it, and present concluding thoughts on depoliticisation, politicisation and the interplay between them.

On Depoliticisation

BWF and Tirana's New Theatre as mega urban transformation projects were meant to be the physical manifestation of post-socialist transition towards democracy and open-market economy. However, the analysis shows that they rather root authoritarian principles and uncompetitive market dynamics within urban governance. As urban governance of the two megaprojects is based on networks composed of elites and investors, in which citizens are completely excluded. Moreover, this state of exclusion expanded to democratic institutions such as city authorities. This is because all the decisions reflected a personal choice of the head of the state in Serbia and the head of the government in Albania and translated into exceptional laws by the national parliaments. In addition, the developers and architects were selected without conducting competitions. Hence, exclusion went hand in hand with exceptionalism in governing the projects.

On top of that, public discourse was systematically depoliticised through directing public debate towards the economic and aesthetic aspects of the projects, enforcing secrecy to hinder any kind of informed public debate, and, stressing the complex and technocratic nature of the projects. These practices have also targeted critical voices through undermining and/or repressing them. This systematic depoliticisation of urban transformation proved to be in itself an urban governance strategy. Chapter two argued that such practices and discourses are not scattered actions and statements but rather depoliticisation strategies which are unified under the aim of denying choice and collective agency over the urban.

While consensus establishes the basis for depoliticisation within democracies, the Serbian and Albanian elites and governments did not invest any effort in developing consensus even within democratic institutions. They instead devoted themselves to bypass a broad range of democratic institutions, issue special laws and amend other laws to avoid the need to develop a consensus. This shows that competitive authoritarian regimes replace consensus by authoritarian practices in establishing the basis for depoliticisation. However, it is important to note that such authoritarian practices are not utilised to dictate the rule in the traditional sense, but rather to deny choice and collective agency under a cover of legal and public legitimacy.

On Politicisation

As discussed, democratic institutions did not provide any political space in which disagreements among adversaries take place. But even worse some of these political institutions were themselves excluded. This systemic depoliticisation catalysed the emergence of new urban activism, which aimed at challenging depoliticisation and constructing inclusive and democratic urban politics. While chapter three provided a basic understanding of NDB and the Alliance as new urban activism movements, chapter four, pushed the analysis further to see how the aims of NDB and the Alliance transcended opposing a specific megaproject to depoliticising the urban through challenging the “foreclosure of the political.” Importantly, chapter four showed that NDB and the Alliance’s unconventional demands and mechanisms formulated new imaginaries which delegitimise the official narrative and undermined the supremacy of the elite fantasy, and invented political spaces where discussions, debates and disagreements could take place.

Although their success in bringing people together to public spaces to discuss, and collectively develop new imaginations of the urban, is unprecedented, they still lack enforcement tools to realise their imaginaries and shift their political spaces to democratic institutions. As a consequence, they have both eventually started to believe that these spaces and imaginaries are not sufficient in themselves – that they need power to cause change. A shift of space of activism from the street to democratic institutions was then believed to equip them with enforcement tools. For that reason,

NDB decided to put pressure on the system also from within by participating in 2018–city elections and 2020–municipal elections. On the other hand, the Alliance took an idealistic stand on politics and politicians, through attempting to influence morals of the DP to adopt the Alliance’s democratic values and beliefs. It is still early to know how this development will affect the two movements. However, their belief that this shift will equip them with the necessary tools to realise their respective sought-after transformations, could also cause their co-option and/or irrelevance.

Importantly, deciding on the distance to the state represents one of the major issues which NDB and the Alliance have to deal with. This challenge was also addressed within the academic debate. According to Swyngedouw (2011, 377–78), the political should configure its “own theatre” and “act at a distance from the state”, otherwise it will deepen the “closure of the space of the political.” On the contrary, Mouffe (2013) disagrees with this complete withdrawal from institutions of democracy and argues that engagement is needed. Both NDB and the Alliance were originally positioning their activism at a distance from the state. However, they eventually realised that the transformations they want to accomplish will not happen without being part of democratic institutions as in the case of NDB or influencing one of the political actors who has better access to democratic institutions, as in the case of the Alliance demonstrates.

Swyngedouw and Wilson (2015) argued that insurgencies are not sufficient in themselves to disrupt the foreclosure of the political. They asserted that new imaginaries have to be formulated, political spaces, where real debate and disagreement rather than consensus can take place, have to be constructed and traversing the elite fantasy has to eventually happen, in order for the insurgencies to be transformed to emancipatory transformations. Applying this on ideas, demands mechanisms developed by NDB and the Alliance, I argued that the two movements realised that their success in mobilising thousands of people, is not sufficient, and consequently, they concentrated their effort in constructing new imaginaries and political spaces. However, due to lack of enforcement tools, discussed earlier, they imagined that the only way to traverse elite fantasy is to shift their activism to bringing

change from within. Importantly, NDB and the Alliance still strongly believe in the importance of keeping their original space of activism, the street. On top of that, comes the need for putting pressure on the system from different directions, as expressed by one of the participants: “one leg in the street, one leg in the parliament.” Whether this strategy would, as hoped, provide them with the power to realise their imaginaries and traverse elite fantasy, or not, is hard to say given the complex political context they function within.

Regardless NDB and the Alliance’s success or failure in traversing elite fantasy through being elected, or changing the morals of big players, the possibility to develop collective imaginations beyond the enforced elite fantasy, and to invent political spaces in the city, has been realised and is there to stay and provide fertile soil for future activism to push further.

Lastly, I believe that depoliticisation and politicisation of urban transformation in Belgrade and Tirana reflect an interplay between denying and claiming collective agency. For that, the study brought depoliticisation and politicisation together in one study, in order to form a multi-dimensional perspective on urban transformation in post-socialist Belgrade and Tirana.

APPENDECIES

Appendix I: List of Participants

I- Belgrade, December 2018, June-July 2019

- Sociology professor in the University of Belgrade.
- Belgrade's City Architect.
- Marketing specialist, active member in NDB and one of the candidates in the 2018-city elections.
- Architect, head of NDB electoral list in the 2018- city elections.
- Architect and former NDB member.
- Journalist and one of NDB's candidates in the 2018- city elections.
- Architect in Belgrade City Council.
- Education psychologist and active NDB member.
- Computer Science university student and NDB active member.
- Political science masters' student and NDB active member.
- Fresh graduate and NDB active member.
- Critical supporter of NDB.

II- Tirana, January and July 2019

- Architecture student.
- Architect and urban planner.
- Philosophy and Media professor and active member of the Alliance.
- Famous movie director and active member of the Alliance.
- Writer poet and active member of the Alliance
- Former director of the National Theatre and active member of the Alliance.
- Political analyst and active member of the Alliance.
- Famous theatre actor and active member of the Alliance.
- Economics professor in the University of Durrës who is against the project.
- University student participated in students protests in 2018 and active against the project.
- Tour guide, environment activist and active against the project.
- Biking activist and active against the project.
- Member of the national parliament representing the DP, and former Deputy Mayor of Tirana.
- Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Design, POLIS University and head of AUA.
- Famous actor and director based in Italy and active member of the Alliance.
- A theatre actress and active member of the Alliance.
- OP member and fresh graduate.

Note: some of the participants were interviewed twice, to stay updated on the developments.

Appendix II: Translation of Alliance and DP Agreement

Translation by: Jonida Hoxha

Declaration [Contract]

To take a common public commitment

Tirana, 25 July 2019,

We, the citizens and artists committed on the protection of the National Theatre, and the Democratic Party of Albania,

1.1. Considering the National Theatre and Experimental Theatre building, the surrounding area as inalienable parts of the Tirana Historical Centre, as well as indisputable historical values and cultural heritage;

1.2. Being proud and aware of the importance of cultural heritage and with the responsibility to preserve our historical and cultural heritage and to safeguard and strengthen the country's spiritual values;

1.3. Praising the efforts to demolish the historical building of National Theatre and Experimental Theatre as anti-national and illegal;

1.4. Bearing in mind that constitutional order, national identity and national heritage are the foundations of the Albanian state, which is obliged to respect and protect them;

1.5. Recognizing the urgent need that art and culture have for more financial support from the State Budget, the construction of new facilities in function of art and culture, and the need for the preservation and full restoration of the National Theatre building;

1.6. Being aware that public property is the property of all citizens, and they can't be alienated, violating the public interest, for the purpose of profit from private business;

1.7. Considering the adoption of a special law to regulate the procedure for realizing a public-private project, concrete and individually defined, as a dangerous precedent for the public interest which substantially endangers equality in the law and economic freedom;

1.8. Considering that the protection of the public interest and right constitutes the base and boundary of state activity, and also being aware that we are at a historical confrontation moment between endangered Albanian democracy and the emerging totalitarianism;

1.9. With the determination to contribute in building a state with rule of law, and a democratic society that guarantees human rights and freedoms, in a democratic political system that guarantees accountability and limitation of power;

WE DECLARE WITH FULL PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY THE FOLLOWING COMMITMENT:

I. Concerning the National Theatre:

1. 'The Alliance for Theatre Protection' expresses its determination to continue the battle for protection of the multiple historical and cultural complexes in which two theatres, National and Experimental currently operate.

2. The Democratic Party commits to support the actions and ongoing of the "Alliance for Theatre Protection" to protect the historical building of National Theatre and at the same time to protect public property threatened by illegal and corrupt alienation, including taking any action, proper and necessary, legal, political and civic.

3. Within one month, from the moment that Democratic Party of Albania will be the ruling and majority political party, the former Skanderbeg District Complex, including the National Theatre and surrounding areas, will be given with priority the status as "Cultural Monument Ensemble", as they are part of the Historical Centre of Tirana City.
4. In the moment that Democratic Party of Albania, will be a major ruling party, the former Skanderbeg district where is included National Theatre and the surrounding areas will undergo the preservation and restoration, by drawing on such a venture the experience and expertise of the architects and experts of the best cultural monuments in the country.
5. Within one month from the moment the Democratic Party of Albania will be the ruling majority party, with priority will abolish as unconstitutional the law no. 37/2018. "On the establishment of a special procedure for the evaluation, negotiation and contracting with object "Designing and realizing the urban project and the new building of the national theatre", as well as any other legal and sub-legal acts deriving from it; it provides illegal alienation of public property.
6. In the moment when the Democratic Party of Albania will be the ruling political majority, it will take all appropriate legal provisions to ensure putting in front of the criminal and administrative responsibility all public decision-makers and private entities involved in the criminal robbery affair of National Theatre, charging them with the obligation to compensate for any damage caused.

II. Concerning provisions to guarantee a functioning democracy, the rule of law and the protection of the public interest:

1. When the Democratic Party of Albania is the ruling political party majority, it shall take any possible legal initiative, in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, including additions and amendments to the applicable legislation, to ensure that any investment made in public property, alienated by violating the law and/or for suspected corruptive motives, shall be returned to the public through confiscation and/ or returning the property to the previous state.
2. In the moment when the Democratic Party of Albania will be the governing political party majority, it shall take all possible legal actions, and adopt any necessary legal and subordinate acts that any private entity has taken active actions or cooperated in the destruction of public property, as referred cases in the clause II / 1, will be obliged under the compensation law for the caused damage and full rehabilitation of the area and public assets, by returning them to the previous state.
3. In the moment when the Democratic Party of Albania will be the ruling political party majority, in order to fully fulfil the commitments mentioned in this public pledge, it will charge a special structure to the General State Attorney General for drafting and pursuing a complete legal strategy, as well as taking any appropriate legal action, which enables at the same time the fulfilment of the above commitments and the protection of the public interest.
4. The Democratic Party commits to propose a legal and institutional reform to increase public involvement and participation in decision-making through sufficient legal guarantees for effective consultation with citizens and the realization of direct democracy through referendums on issues of public interest;
5. The Democratic Party is committed for an electoral system that enables citizens to speak out for their representatives and a constitutional reform aimed at enhancing

control and balance between powers or strengthening accountability and control of power. Discussion about this issue should be in a transparent and inclusive way, including in their composition all groups of interest and civil society.

III. Related with the need for a real Reform in art and culture:

Within one year from the moment when the Democratic Party of Albania will be parliamentary majority, in consultation with the community of artists, it will start an open and all-inclusive process to reform art and culture sector in the country, aiming:

1. Decentralization of cultural institutions in agreement with the artistic community and the transformation of budgetary institutions of art and culture into independent public institutions;
2. Reforming the legal framework to guarantee the status and rights of the artist's profession, including their monetary remuneration;
3. Ensuring effective copyright protection in Albania;
4. Increase budgets for art and culture at the highest levels of the region.

FOR THIS PURPOSE:

The signatory parties are well-understood to work together and invite all citizens to contribute to the fulfilment of the objectives embodied in this public commitment.

The Contracting Parties undertake to inform and consult each other on how to fulfil the commitments mentioned in this declaration on time. Representative organizations of artists, groups of interest, and civil society representatives have all the rights to request full information at any time, as well as the fulfilment of these commitments, following any mechanism and taking any action they deem necessary to guarantee their realization.

A signed copy of this Declaration [Contract] shall be made public on the official websites of the Democratic Party of Albania and shall be made available to the public in the most appropriate form and convenient way.

The publication of this Declaration is also considered to be an informing appropriate tool, of any private entity that intends to engage in active action or cooperate in the destruction of buildings and the area around the National Theatre, by acquiring public property, through their unlawful alienation, according to the constitutional and legal reasoning expressed in the Decree of the President of the Republic to return for reconsideration the law no. 37/2018 in the Parliament of Albania. Any action taken from now on will be legally considered to be in mistrust.

With the assurance of its full fulfilment, expressed through the content and public signature of this Declaration:

PARTIES INCLUDED IN THIS PUBLIC COMMITMENT:

Alliance for Theatre Protection:

Democratic Party of Albania:

Chairman, Lulzim BASHA

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