

# Between defiance and compliance: a new civil society in the post-Yugoslav space?

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## Introduction

In post-socialist contexts scholars and practitioners widely regard civil society as a key actor in resisting and eventually defeating the authoritarian orders and thus bringing about transition to democracy, and conceptually as a fundamental arena for democratic consolidation. In the post-Yugoslav space, civil society was perhaps considered to be even more vital because it was understood as opposed to pervasive nationalism and authoritarianism (Pavlović 2009:220; see Bieber 2003:82-87), or 'Balkanisation' (Fotev 2004:15-20).

The prominence of civil society within democratization scholarship has been reflected at the level of policies. In fact, the international community directed a lot of attention and a huge amount of funds at 'strengthening' civil society, whose development has been viewed as a measure of democratization itself and whose role is considered to be always inherently positive. The income of sizeable donors' funds over the years resulted in a big professionalized sector of non governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the broad domain of 'reform' usually closely related to Euro-Atlantic integration, which has led to the rise of technocratic knowledge of project management, and the emergence of groups of well paid NGO associates (Lazic 2005:76-82; Vetta 2012:177-179; for one of the earliest critical examinations of civil society in the post-Yugoslav space see: Stubbs 1996).

In the past couple of years, against the backdrop of this 'liberal democratic model of civil society' (Baker 2002), and especially with the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, we have witnessed the rise of new initiatives that try to frame the social reality in different terms. One of the first cases was workers resistance in the pharmaceutical factory Jugoremedija in Serbia that took place from 2003 to

2007 and involved an occupation of the factory, strikes, collecting international support, and succeeded in annulling the privatization and returning the company to the workers as small shareholders (see Music 2013:49-55). Also in Serbia, a Coordinating Committee of Workers Protests was created in 2009, as a horizontal network of employees from seven enterprises that underwent allegedly corrupt privatizations in conjunction with the activists of the grassroots organization Freedom Fight, which tried to connect disperse striking groups, to provide support in protests and in procedural battles to annul the privatizations. The protests that shook Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014 are from this same domain of worker-related struggles. They sprang out of demonstrations of workers from several privatized factories that went bankrupt and that demanded their unpaid salaries and benefits, and quickly expanded across the country. Certainly one of the most important social upheavals in the post-Yugoslav space, the 2014 protests became widely known for 'plenums' - assemblies of self-organised citizens where the outrage from the streets was articulated in demands from ethnocratic elites (for analysis of plenums see Gordy 2014; Jansen 2014). Another wave of mobilizations were the student protests and movements that developed across the post-Yugoslav space, reacting to constant increases in university fees, which had replaced what had previously been a guaranteed right to free education. Besides organizing street protests in Serbia, Slovenia and most intensively in Croatia (see Reinprecht 2013; Stiks and Horvat 2015), there were experiments in university occupations and plenums in applying direct democracy. Lastly, there are a range of initiatives in what could be termed defence of common goods, such as public space and urban infrastructure. One such mobilization is the 'Right to the City', a long standing protest against the construction of a shopping centre in Zagreb city centre that mobilized broad popular concern over issues of public interest, corruption and lack of public participation in urban planning (for an analysis of new activists initiatives in Croatia through the lenses of generational change see Stubbs 2012).

Indeed, these initiatives seem to speak to the emergence of a civil society that challenges the hegemony of post-socialist transition as an inevitable fact and a linear progress from socialism to liberal democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration (see Jović 2010; Buden 2015), and for the first time articulate the critique of contemporary liberal capitalism in the post-Yugoslav space. It does so by bringing the notions stigmatized since the end of socialism - social justice, class relations, public property - back into the public sphere and using them as a 'register' with which to think and talk about social relations (see Stiks and Horvat 2015; Kraft 2015). To paraphrase Eyal *et al.*, it seems that these initiatives give birth to a civil society that is not just the carrier of a discourse of freedom, but also confronts the question of inequality (1998:178).

However, rather than seeing the 'new wave' of contention as containing forces that are completely novel, emancipatory, critical and leaderless, I maintain that it needs to be understood in relational and contextual terms. In other words, in order to better comprehend these mobilizations and their emancipatory potential we need to analyze more closely if and how they are related to dominant transitional discourses and practices of liberal civil society.

In this paper I focus on one such initiative, dubbed 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' that emerged in 2014 against the big construction project on the river banks in Belgrade. By analyzing the discourse and some elements of its practice, such as networking, forms of action, knowledge production and funding, I try to establish whether and how this initiative is entangled with dominant transitional narratives and liberal NGO practice. Then, I briefly look at broader implications - what this case tells us about new developments in post-socialist and post-Yugoslav civil society, particularly about the possibilities of the emergence of a counter-hegemonic project, one based on a political framework that challenges the liberal civil society sphere.

## Belgrade Waterfront

The citizens' initiative 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' (Ne da(vi)mo Beograd) was formed in 2014, as a response to a controversial government-backed construction project along the banks of Belgrade's river, the Sava. The 3.5bn Euro project, named 'Belgrade Waterfront', popularly known as 'Belgrade on Water' is expected to take over two decades to finish, and to see the construction of a 1,77 square km district of exclusive residential and business venues – a business hub, some 17,000 residential units, a number of hotels, the biggest shopping mall in the Balkans and a 180-metre Dubai-style glass tower. The investor is Eagle Hills, a company based in Abu Dhabi and chaired by Mohamed Alabbar, who also founded Emaar, a company behind the world's largest shopping mall and tallest building in Dubai. The revitalization and redevelopment of the banks of Belgrade's two rivers – the Sava and the Danube – and the relocation of the industrial zone and the heavy traffic that passes there have for a long-time been the subject of discussions by architects and urban planners. Indeed, some of the world's leading architects – Daniel Libeskind and Zaha Hadid – are behind two other recent master plans to revitalize the area on the banks of the Danube. 'Belgrade Waterfront' came as the last of the redevelopment initiatives and was announced by Aleksandar Vučić first during his candidacy for Mayor of Belgrade in 2012 and then in his capacity as Prime Minister two years later, in which he promised that it would bring about 20 000 new jobs and would be a bolster to the local economy.

The 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' initiative (hereafter: the Initiative) mobilized a relatively broad group of activists, journalists, architects and freelancers from different professions, who questioned the project's legality and transparency, as well as the need for a large and luxurious commercial district in the centre of Belgrade. Becoming broadly known for its mascot, an oversized yellow duck (in Serbian slang duck stands both for fraud and penis), the Initiative

has organized protests, produced media material, organized debates and roundtables of professionals, carried out press conferences and street actions, participated in local government meetings, and has campaigned and submitted formal complaints to public institutions.

## **The arguments of the Initiative: the call for a better transition and the quest for social justice**

The 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' initiative developed several lines of argument against the 'Belgrade on Water' project, drawing on different discourses.

The discourses that the Initiative primarily drew on belong to the dominant transitional register in which the desired transformation of society is seen in terms of democratization, transparency, citizens' participation in decision-making processes, the rule of law and economic efficiency. The Initiative's texts and statements react to key events in the project's development: its presentation to the public; changes to the General Urban Plan of Belgrade; the creation of a special spatial plan; the adoption of a special law (*lex specialis*) to allow the expropriation of the land for the purposes of construction; the signing of the contract; the presenting of the contract; and the beginning of works. Throughout all of these stages, the Initiative's emphasis was generally placed on the lack of transparency, the exclusion of citizens from decision-making and the absence of the rule of law, with preferential treatment for the investor and his interests. Thus, for example, the Initiative contests the way that 'Belgrade on Water' emerged in the first place, practically overnight and almost in secrecy, without any consultations with the public. Further, they argue that the government was not transparent in dealing with the contract, pointing out that it was only due to public pressure that it finally revealed its details, several months after it had been

signed. Next, they focus on the overly fast changes in legislation needed for the project to take off, such as the adoption of the special spatial plan, changes to the city's urban plan and the designation of *lex specialis* that had been passed by the Serbian parliament. Sometimes the Initiative's statements approximate the language of good governance and expertise, for example when calling for 'the respect of professional planning standards and applications of mechanisms of protection of public interest' (November 3, 2014), or when denouncing the adopted urban plan because it is against 'the positive regulations of the Republic of Serbia and adopted without any real consultations with citizens' (November 8, 2014). This is particularly the case when the Initiative uses some of the formal mechanisms of communication with authorities, for example in the text of eight formal complaints against the Draft of the spatial plan (October, 7, 2014).

Within the same register of mainstream transitional discourse, the Initiative deploys the language of economic efficiency to argue that the project will have damaging effects on the Serbian economy. Their analysis of the contract emphasizes that it stipulates more burdensome obligations for the Serbian state than for the investor who simply has to provide up to 150 million Euros (instead of 3.5 billion as previously announced in the Serbian media) and give an additional 150 million Euro loan to the Serbian government, while obtaining the possibility of conversion of the right to use the land into ownership without any additional charges. Meanwhile the Serbian government is taking a loan from the investor in order to fulfill its part of the obligations, which include preparing the terrain for construction works, preparing the baseline study, easing the obtaining of all necessary permissions, and allowing the investor to freely use some of the historical buildings near the river banks (Contract analysis, September 21, 2015). The Initiative points out that although Serbia is practically giving up the valuable land by the river banks, it will gain only 32% of the eventual future profit, while 68% goes to the investor (*Nothing for something*, December 2015). Building on

the threat of economic damage, the Initiative implies that the arrangement between the Serbian oligarchy and Eagle Hill company is suspicious and that there is no serious investment intention.

These discursive strategies - calling upon transparency, citizen participation in decision-making, the rule of law, economic efficiency - repeat the key notions of a democratic transition as understood by the international actors and stipulated by all Serbian governments since the 'democratic changes' in 2000, including the current one under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić. Therefore it could be said that the Initiative is relying on emblematic transitional notions dominant in political discourse to contest the government's conduct.

Another line of argumentation that the Initiative is developing uses the idea of public interest and deploys the discourse of social justice and inequalities. This is a more contentious dimension as it relies on notions that have since been sidelined, understood to belong to the undesired socialist past. Here the issue of public interest is not elaborated only in the above-mentioned terms of transparency as the right of the public to know, or procedural equality in front of the law, or economic efficiency, but in terms of class antagonism between rich and poor. That is, there is a 'We' that seems to include the public, the 'ordinary' citizens of Belgrade and Serbia and sometimes the Initiative, and on the other side there is a 'They', which includes members of the political and economic elite, the ruling political party, the government, the investor, the police, the bureaucracy that is working under the government's political command, etc. (February 18, 2015; March 19, 2015; September 18, 2015; September 29, 2015). Thus, while the government describes the project as being of 'national interest', the Initiative claims exactly the opposite - that it is a question of clear commercial private interest. The 'national interest' in the government's terminology is only 'the product of suspicious deals and private interests of

political and economic elites' (March 19, 2015). The class nature of this antagonism is also demonstrated using economic calculations - the Initiative estimates that the price of each apartment in the new residential area will be more than 400,000 Euros, and points out that this is equal to more than 84 average annual salaries in Serbia, which means it will inevitably lead to spatial segregation between rich and poor (Complaints 3, 6, 7, October 7, 2014).

The polarization of positions and new class relations is perhaps most accentuated in one of the Initiative's later statements, made after the protests against the government and the investor laying the foundation stone. Here, the government's giving away of public land for luxurious apartments is contrasted with the introduction of austerity measures and cuts in education, health and infrastructure. Further, the fact that the police stopped the protesters, while the 'counter protesters' - supporters of 'Belgrade on Water' and allegedly supporters of the Serbian Progressive Party led by the Prime Minister Vučić - were let through, was seen by the Initiative as related to the segregation between rich and poor: 'There would have been more of us today if the authorities didn't block the whole area [...] They let people pass selectively, according to their party affiliation [...] That is the future of our cities according to them: private riverbanks for those that have money to pay and limited movement for everyone else!' (September 29, 2015).

Whilst connecting 'Belgrade on Water' with austerity and deepening class divisions points to the important structural dimensions of Serbian transition, what the statement overlooks is the class relation between protesters and 'counter protesters'. That is, those supporters of 'Belgrade on Water' that were let through by the police are probably not the same people that will be living in the luxurious flats, as might be understood from the Initiative's statement. On the contrary, they could easily be in a less advantageous social position and depend more on

party affiliation and clientelistic networks through which allocation of jobs and resources takes place than the protestors themselves.

However, this line of contention based on structural grounds, although more antagonistic than that on transparency or good governance, is mainly focussed on Serbia's present authoritarian political leadership and its possibly suspicious deal with the Arabic investor. There are no elaborate attempts to relate the current construction project to other aspects of contemporary capitalism or its power structures. Thus for example, the role of the European Union, one of the most important external actors in the Serbian political and economic space, a funder of reforms and a partner of all Serbian governments in the past 15 years, is overlooked in the Initiative's statements. Indeed, the social relations of inequality, as well as the privatization, austerity and corrupt local elites that the Initiative refers to are intrinsically linked to the structural reforms and market liberalization that are part of Serbia's EU accession agenda, which is also fervently advocated for by the Serbian Prime Minister. And neither do they tackle the understanding of the transition as a move from the backwardness of socialism to liberal democracy and EU membership – something which dominates the discourse of the Serbian elite and the 'international community'. They fail to say how this hegemonic narrative is related to deepening social inequalities that, according to the Initiative, 'Belgrade on Water' epitomizes.

One of the Initiative's activist does make an attempt to more explicitly contextualize 'Belgrade on Water' within broader processes and structural issues. In an opinion piece he scrutinizes what he regards as a seemingly depoliticized notion of transition, emphasizing how in fact the transition has led to 'a deindustrialized country... and citizens impoverished and betrayed by promises of a better life'. Here, the transition is elaborated in class and structural terms - it is equalized with the imperative of privatization and the 'Belgrade on Water' project

is shown as its clear consequence: 'it is a logical enclosure to the "transition", at the end of which you will not be able to reach the centre by train but could sail in on a yacht, if you can afford one.' (Aksentijevic, 26 November 2015). Such an understanding of the current construction project not as a deviation by the specific authoritarian Serbian leadership, but as an expression of contemporary capitalist forces and their ideological work, allows the Initiative to move beyond a bounded and localized scope.

In sum, the Initiative seems to balance between, on the one hand, some of the dominant transitional notions of transparency, participatory decision-making, good governance and rule of law and, on the other hand, the idea of public interest and a discourse of social justice and class relations. One of the reasons why the latter dimension is less pronounced might be the Initiative's effort to network broadly, or in social movement studies terms, to achieve 'resonance' with potential adherents (Benford and Snow 2000). For contesting 'Belgrade on Water' by referring to class, inequalities and privatization, or by connecting it to the broader ideological assumptions of post-socialist transition, contemporary capitalism or power structures such as the European Union, could presumably put off some middle class supporters, thus undermining the Initiative's potential audience. Consequently, notions of transparency, efficiency, participation, expert opinion, and a focus on the authoritarian character of the Serbian leadership might be seen to be a more promising base from which to mobilise.

## **Networking, action and knowledge production: strategies of action between the "grassroots" and NGO models**

The 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' initiative emerged from the work of several individuals, active in the past couple of years in overlapping initiatives and collectives that could be broadly described as belonging to the civil society or

alternative culture scene of Belgrade. The founding platform behind the Initiative is called the 'Ministry of Space', a collective working since 2011 on urban policies and the use of abandoned public spaces. It was a protagonist at the Inex film building occupation, one of the longest occupations - four years - in present day Belgrade, where occupations of any length are quite rare. But it also deployed other forms of public space intervention aimed at bringing the topic to the public attention. Another overlapping initiative with the same focus is Mikro Art, that, unlike Ministry of Space, is a registered association, and that has, for example, turned an abandoned street passage in Belgrade into a permanent street gallery. Besides these two groups, there were some other attempts at occupying or entering abandoned public spaces, such as cinema Zvezda or the BIGZ building, during which debates emerged as to whether or not such an act was political, or purely 'cultural'. In any case, although the topic of the use of public space and occupation did enter the public sphere, it was more or less confined to Belgrade alternative cultural and art circles.

The presentation of the 'Belgrade Waterfront' by the Serbian Prime Minister in 2014 was a good occasion for the Ministry of Space to start the new 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' initiative, with a possibly broader audience and a wider group of supporters. This collective of four people remains the core group behind the Initiative - it coordinates and organizes the activities and generates ideas for future actions (Personal interview, January 18, 2016).

In terms of networking, the Initiative has developed a network of collaborators - individuals and organisations - that seem to function with variable intensity and on a flexible and *ad hoc* basis. The most defined partnership was established with the Academy of Architecture, a professional scientific association, including the most established architects in Serbia (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). The Academy has been a fierce opponent of 'Belgrade on Water',

publishing two declarations, giving statements and holding meetings, and individual members have also published articles and spoken out against the project. As for the liberal Serbian civil society scene, continuous partnership exists with Transparency Serbia, that has been active independently as well, contending the construction project on the grounds of lack of transparency, unclear conditions of public-private partnership, potential conflicts of interest and economic risks.

Apart from this cooperation, the Initiative sees itself as separate from the NGO scene. There is cooperation, but it is perceived as mostly limited to general support and *ad hoc* occasional involvement and contributions (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). Allegedly, one of the reasons for the weak involvement of NGOs is the lack of a project framework and funding opportunities. The Initiative received several offers from NGOs to 'write a project' together, that is to search for a grant and to work against the 'Belgrade on Water' in the scope of a donor-funded project, which the Initiative sees as different from its own approach, because, as one member stated, 'we do it anyway' (Personal interview, January 18, 2016).

However, the Initiative maintains the importance of communication and networking and does manage to engage individuals and organisations belonging to different social and professional spheres. Thus, for example, there is cooperation with architects, but also with other representatives of the intellectual elite, such as the university professors of sociology and economy that spoke at one of the Initiative's events. Then there is the cooperation with institutions that built their profiles as voices of anti-Milosević opposition during the 1990s, such as the Centre for Cultural Decontamination or the Rex Cultural Centre, as well as younger generation NGOs oriented towards reforms and policy work (Transparency and CRTA). Lastly, some activists and people close to what could

be called the independent cultural scene spoke at a protest organized by the Initiative in September 2015.

Regarding the Initiative's forms of action, a broad repertoire of contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) has been deployed throughout the last two years. Firstly, they have made a series of official communications using existing procedures and mechanisms for filing complaints. This included attempts to participate and contest the project at meetings at the city level where decisions were supposed to take place, and the creation and submission of a series of in-depth complaints to the changes to the General Urban Plan in July 2014 and to the special spatial plan the following October. Secondly, they organised events dedicated to the topic - public round tables in which recognized individuals spoke about the consequences of the 'Belgrade on Water' project. Lastly, they also mobilized the public for more confrontational actions, such as the protests organized when the Parliament was discussing the *lex specialis* (April 2015), when the contract was being signed (the protest was called 'Let's show them the duck', April 2015), and when the Serbian Prime minister and Alabbar laid the foundation stone (September 2015). Throughout the life of the Initiative there has been an intensive production of media material - a blog, facebook page, press releases, and newsletters - and of small scale actions that could be considered publicity stunts, for example attending one of the assemblies in the city administration with water toys, putting a 2m high duck in front of the Parliament when MPs voted for *lex specialis*, or placing yellow tapes with the word 'illegal' around the planned construction site.

The usage of such a variety of methods for opposing the construction project needs to be understood chronologically. That is, we have a change in tactics - from a 'procedural' method (building arguments and making appeals) towards more confrontational actions. After all their complaints and grounded argumentation made with the help of qualified experts were rejected as

unfounded by the city institutions, the activists began to regard these formal procedures of gathering public opinion as being simply for show and never intended to lead to substantive debate. This led to a change: "From doing "forensic" work, analyzing in detail every document and statement, we changed the tactic to show that it is a complete fraud, that the whole process is fake, that there isn't any serious intention to build something, but only a certain financial interest, not clear whose. And then the idea was born of having a duck, which in slang stands for fraud and the penis, as a symbol of the whole thing" (Personal interview, January 18, 2016).

The rejection of existing procedures and mechanisms of citizen participation in decision-making as misleading and useless, the adoption of quite a confrontational style, and the use of humour in mocking and exposing the government, clearly differentiates the Initiative from standard NGO practice in post 2000 Serbia. Embedded in Euro-Atlantic integration narratives, reform-policy frameworks and project instrumental rationality, the NGO role is typically performed in functional partnership with the state and as a useful corrective of existing institutions and policies. They rarely reject such a prescribed role or refuse to participate in the 'decision-making process', even if it is clear that it merely simulates public deliberation, and this is where the Initiative stands apart from Serbian liberal civil society practice, especially at the later stage of its engagement.

The process of knowledge production within the Initiative could be described as 'collaborative', in the sense that it combines diverse abilities and learning practices. An example of this collaborative dimension was the process of writing comments to the proposed changes to the General Urban Plan. The Initiative organized a public event in the Rex Cultural Centre, inviting people to jointly read the proposals, discuss the document and make comments. Similarly, the method

of work applied *within* the core group of the Initiative is also seen by them as "collaborative group work" (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). A case of such collaborative knowledge production was reading and commenting on the contract between Serbia and the investor. After the contract was made public in September 2015, the core activist group read, discussed and made comments in shared online document over a 24 hour period. They do not think that an external expert - lawyer, economist - opinion is always necessary: "We mainly do things on our own, read, discuss, learn from one another, we put a lot of time into this... I would call it self-education [...] We were meeting some lawyers and it turned out we understood things correctly on our own" (Personal interview, January 18, 2016).

However, the horizontal, collaborative, processual and empowering dimensions of creating knowledge come alongside demands to have an 'impact' and be 'relevant', which further imply certain hierarchies in decision-making about what kind of knowledge is needed, when it is needed, and in what form it is needed. Indeed, it seems that the core activist group, the Ministry of Space, is the one that sets the agenda: "We're expected to pull most things together in terms of logistic and coordination and in terms of guidelines for work... generally our voice is most listened to" (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). On the level of particular instances of collaborative work, they also seem to be the ones determining the priorities and setting the knowledge production process. Thus, for example, the shaping of the above-mentioned event of commenting on the changes to the General Urban Plan in the Rex Cultural Centre is described in the following terms: "We placed five separate tables in the room, to cover all the aspects - legal, urbanistic, political, etc. of the project, each table for one aspect. So if you're interested in one aspect you go to that table. Then they all read the Plan together and try to find what is wrong with it, what kind of regulation and standards are breached, and try to shape the comments [...] We worked for one

day" (Personal interview, January 18, 2016).

Thus, the participatory and collaborative dimension of the knowledge production does not render this process structureless, spontaneous, or leaderless. This sort of explicitly horizontal, collaborative and participatory work that is entangled with the presence of someone who (more or less implicitly) sets the framework under which knowledge is created - topics, methods, forms, timeline - is often encountered in NGO practice – for example in trainings, consultative meetings, workshops, ‘non formal’ education etc. It would be also interesting to unpack the knowledge production within the core group of the Ministry of space, by on site observation. Although it is described as ‘collaborative’ or ‘group’ work, it is safe to assume that it involves power relations and hierarchies in decision-making.

Moving to the issue of funding, some aspects of the Initiative’s funding practice seem to be close to what could be called grassroots or activist, while others are embedded in the ‘project world’, emblematic of Serbian liberal civil society in the past 20 years.

The Initiative does not have any project-based donor funding, nor do they seem to try to raise the money this way (this would be difficult anyway as they are not registered). Their whole budget of 2000 Euros was partly raised in one specially dedicated benefit event when they asked their supporters for contributions, and partly came from some international networks of which they are members (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). In an interesting twist of accusations, the Serbian Prime Minister accused them of being financed by one of the Serbian tycoons and the opposition party. The Initiative responded using irony, organizing a benefit event called, ‘Be a tycoon that pays us’ and going public about the sources of their modest budget.

Although the grassroots and activist approach and the modest budget make the Initiative different from most policy-reform oriented NGOs, it is still deeply interrelated to the 'project world'. That is, some of the expenses of the Initiative are covered by the projects of the Ministry of Space and Mikro Art. These two organisations together won several grants, the biggest one being from the Norwegian embassy for "citizens' participation in urban development and urban resources management, contributing to the development of a just city and society" (Norwegian Embassy 2015) that allowed the prospect of stable funding for a couple of years. There are also several other projects that they have won funding for, in partnership with other organisations, such as: the 'ACT4CITY Independent cultural actors towards sustainable Balkan cities' grant from the Balkans Arts and Culture Fund; 'New ideas for old buildings', a grant from the EU's 'Europe for Citizens Programme' ; finally, the Street gallery of Mikro Art is supported by small grants from the Serbian Ministry of Culture and the City Secretariat for Culture. From these ongoing projects they pay for office space near the city centre from which both the the Ministry of Space and the Initiative operate, as well as salaries for the core group of four activists. It is this project funding that helps the Initiative to function, and requires that the activists have knowledge of 'project technology' (i.e. how to enter into international partnerships, write projects, produce reports, ensure the success of the projects, manage budgets, reach deadlines, maintain relationships with donors, use English, etc.). Although these projects are related to the idea of the Initiative in their general theme of use of public space and citizen participation, they each have their own planned set of objectives and activities that are not always easy to balance with the daily work on the campaign against 'Belgrade Waterfront' (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). Such an ability to balance all the different projects and partnerships at the same time and comply with the reporting schemes is another competence that the activists possess and that is very close

to the competences used in professionalized civil society.

On the other hand, the amount and division of salaries that are paid from the above mentioned projects is untypical for the NGO world. Specifically, the salaries of a couple of hundreds euros a month are about an average monthly salary in Serbia and almost certainly lower than the average NGO income in Belgrade. Also, the salaries are equal - four people have exactly the same income. This is explained by the fact that everyone is doing everything and that there is no clear division of responsibility (Personal interview, January 18, 2016). Additional honoraria that are earned individually when speaking or participating at events on behalf of the organisation are put into a common fund. This opens up questions around the class background of the activists, the way they make their living, their professional trajectories, as well as the relations between the core group of the Initiative and other activists, which is beyond the scope of this particular research.

Overall, the Initiative's practice could be characterized as heterogeneous and, like the discourse it deploys, seems to be balancing between different tendencies and concerns. On the one hand the Initiative stands aside from the liberal civil society scene, as evident in its rejection of existing procedures offered by the actually existing democracy in Serbia, its challenging of the founding principles and not simply the procedural details of the project 'Belgrade on Water' and its deployment of more confrontational means of contention. At the same time, it is entangled with liberal civil society practice, not only in terms of networking with some Serbian NGOs, but also in some aspects of the knowledge production process and in its use of activists' competence in 'project technology' - fundraising, project management and building partnerships etc. - to help the Initiative to function.

## Conclusion

I return now to the question I raised at the beginning, that is, whether and how is the initiative 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' against the 'Belgrade on Water' construction project entangled with dominant transitional narratives and the practice of liberal civil society. Overall, there are ambiguities in the Initiative's discourse and practice probably mirroring the attempts to harmonize different interests and concerns. The Initiative's texts rely partially on the hegemonic view of post-socialist transition where social transformation is thought of in terms of good governance, citizen participation in decision-making, transparency, rule of law and economic efficiency. However, elements of public interest, social justice and class relations also appear in the Initiative's discourse, although in a less pronounced way. In any case, this dimension of the Initiative's texts, albeit more contentious, is mainly bound to the local context – presenting the Serbian political leadership as in a possibly suspicious deal with the Arab investor, without 'reaching out' to relate the current construction project to other aspects of contemporary capitalism or power structures.

Similar attempts to balance between different voices are evident in the Initiative's practice. Rejecting the 'participatory decision-making' within already defined institutional framework as serving the ruling elite and not public deliberation, turning to open confrontation, challenging the principles underlying 'Belgrade on Water' instead of simply its procedural details, are all dimensions of the Initiative's work that set it apart from the practices of liberal civil society. At the same time, the Initiative appears entangled with these practices in terms of some aspects of knowledge production and its engagement with 'project technology' - using donor funding and project relationships as the vehicle for supporting the Initiative.

In broader terms, the case of 'We won't let Belgrade d(r)own' speaks about the attempts among civil society actors to move away from the model of NGOs as professionalised entities that work on reforming institutions and policies, expressing themselves instead as a civil society that is critical of liberal reforms and of what seem to be the postulates of transition - privatization, diminishing provisions in health, education and social protection, and rising economic inequalities. In other words, there is a development of a civil society that attempts to introduce structural and class issues as legitimate notions around which political action can be waged, to challenge mainstream narratives and thus render the 'trajectories of transition more open and indeterminate' (Burawoy 1999:309).

However, while the recent new wave of contention does challenge the status quo, I hope my analysis has shown that the dividing line between the new initiatives and liberal civil society is not always as unambiguous as one might expect. Therefore, in order to better understand whether and how a 'counter-hegemonic' project can emerge in the post-Yugoslav sphere, we need to tackle the potential ambivalence of new contentious civil society initiatives in their relationship to the mainstream transitional framework and practices that developed within liberal civil society in the past twenty years.

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