



# Belgrade: Imaging the future and creating a European metropolis



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## ABSTRACT

Belgrade is a European city, the capital of the Republic of Serbia and previously capital of Yugoslavia. The city lies on the confluence of two major European rivers, the Danube and the Sava. Throughout its long history, Belgrade has often been a border city between the East and West and as a result has often been attacked. This has not only influenced, but also shaped its urban structure, especially in the 19th century, when most of the structures related to its oriental Turkish character were demolished and reconstruction of the city began. Belgrade's need to develop itself as a European metropolis in accordance with European standards reveals the discrepancy between its political and cultural pretensions and the real economic opportunities. It also reveals the need of the political and intellectual elite to keep Belgrade, Serbia and Yugoslavia in a state of general development that leaves enough space for political and ideological manipulation, as well as social and national experiments, particularly in the communist and post-communist period. Based on its specific character, Belgrade is recognized as a useful case study that is not simply a "post-communist" city, but a palimpsest of every catastrophe that has been experienced in Europe over a century or more. The connection between the political and urban changes in Belgrade throughout the 20th century is more than evident. Accordingly, this paper will explore what has driven the urban change and the extent to which the balance between state, market and civil society is present in Belgrade, both during its history and today.

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## 1. Introduction

Belgrade is a particular city – a South East European capital. Its functional area covers 7.4% of Serbian territory (5758 km), and it is where a quarter of the population (25.4%) lives. Belgrade has an important geo-strategic position within the River Danube Corridors 7 and 10 and is positioned on the two Core Network Corridors (Mediterranean and Orient/East Mediterranean) (European Commission, 2015). Its total population is 1,659,440 (Regional Spatial Plan, 2011).

The history of Belgrade and its modernization form a double dichotomy. The geographical position and configuration of the terrain make it special, both in relation to the Balkan hinterland and to the Pannonian plain. At the same time it is the European capital that has suffered the most destruction, migration, and economic and identity crises in its modern history. Belgrade's early urban development was dictated by: the specific economic conjuncture of Serbia and later the united Yugoslav state; the cultural influences that were within the reach of

this small underdeveloped city; its social structure with predominantly rural provinces; and urban solutions resulting from ideological positions and political decisions rather than logical professional and rational planning based on the practical needs of the city and its inhabitants. From the late nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth century, Belgrade was the scene of political and military conflicts, as well as processes in which the political and intellectual elites manipulated urban and social development due to weak institutions and an underdeveloped private sector of industries and services. The overall historical framework periodically left Belgrade in physical and moral ruins, namely by means of the Balkan wars, WWI and WWII, and the violent breakdown of Yugoslavia followed by the NATO intervention of 1999. Politically, the city administration and urban development suffered from an excess of authoritarianism and lack of competencies in Serbia and later Yugoslavia (as kingdoms), in the communist Yugoslav federation, post-communist Belgrade, and Belgrade after 1999.

In the proto-democratic conflicts at the end of the 20th century, Serbia became politically defined by its national project that was imposed by force, and by the decision of most of the other republics to leave Yugoslavia. At present, like all countries in the region, Serbia aspires to join the European Union, and was awarded EU candidate status in March 2012. December 2015 marked the formal start of the negotiation process.

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## RESEARCH DIAGRAM

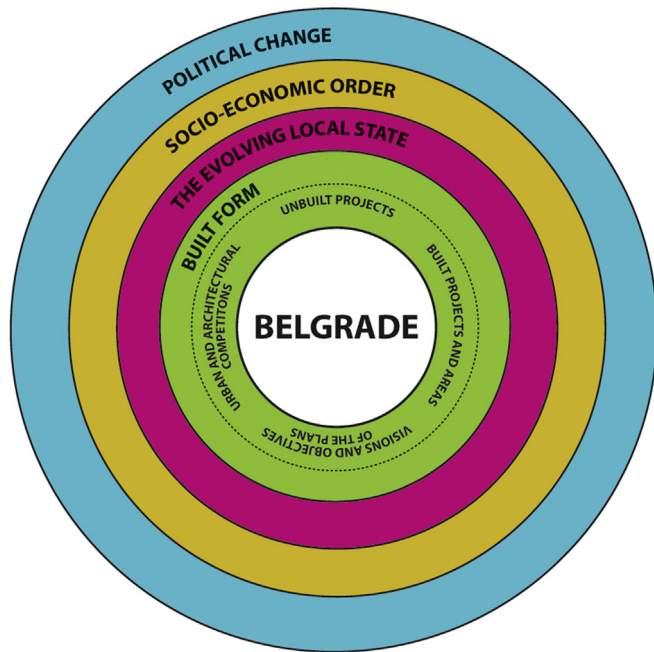


Fig. 1. Belgrade City profile research diagram.

The structure of the paper follows the chronological order of Belgrade's development and its changes through history, with the aim to connect the main European periods of crisis with Belgrade's physical structure, as well as to give an overview of the urban visions that were tied to particular historical moments. By keeping to this chronologically guided structure every period is presented through its political change, socio-economic order, the evolving state and local government, and the built form (see Fig. 1). In the domain of the built form, particular periods are presented through architectural plans and visions, including the main objectives of those plans, as well as built objects and areas of the city, major urban and architectural competitions and un-built projects.

The overview begins in 1867 when Belgrade had its first modern urban plan, and continues to the present, following the 13 most significant planning documents, all directly influenced by the political power of the time. They present the core visions of the main planning

documents that have guided Belgrade's urban development through its modern history.

## 2. The first outlines of a regulated, post-Oriental capital (Belgrade from 1867 to WWI)

The autonomous Serbian principality, later an independent monarchy, remained marginal during the nineteenth century, and Belgrade attracted attention either as the cause of or as the solution to the systemic crises on the European periphery of the Ottoman Empire. Belgrade's urban development faced an Ottoman and Habsburg legacy in the structure of its institutions, economy, culture, customs and mentality. In particular, the limitations of its unfavorable conjuncture were felt: the distance from world ports and intensive business routes, and its backward rural society. Belgrade did not easily accept central European neatness, retaining its freedom, and with that the disorder, negligence and public lack of responsibility of the Ottoman Mediterranean spirit.

The original Belgrade elite developed in the shadow of the last traces of Turkish military occupation. The permanently liberated Serbian capital attracted settlers from the Danube region and the entire Yugoslav territory, since the culture, science, art and institutions all shared a common language, and the state apparatus revealed a chronic dearth of competent staff. Belgrade rapidly gained its initial cosmopolitan character despite its modest scale and scarce economic resources. Foreigners of any origin were key facilitators of change, modernization and Europeanization (Dajč & Samardžić, 2012). Cosmopolitan, European Belgrade was counterbalanced by the army and clerical circles, as well as domestic intellectuals inclined to national romanticism and irrational Russophilia, and the ruling circles who were neither willing nor able to adapt to urban daily life. The character of Belgrade's culture was defined by the dispersal of the colorful but modest, dilapidated urban milieu, and resistance to modernization and Europeanization in the form of efforts to preserve the traditions and lifestyle of small isolated urban backgrounds remembered from the previous centuries of Ottoman decadence.

Austrian urban heritage from the first half of the eighteenth century, when Belgrade belonged temporarily to the European circle of the late Baroque (Samardžić, 2011), began to be renewed as a result of complex influences coming from both the Habsburg capital and the Serbian urban class from the Habsburg Danube region. The most visible contours of this relationship can be seen on a series of neoclassical facades that permeated the central urban core, and beautiful examples of

The first research period between two crisis: from 1867 to 1914

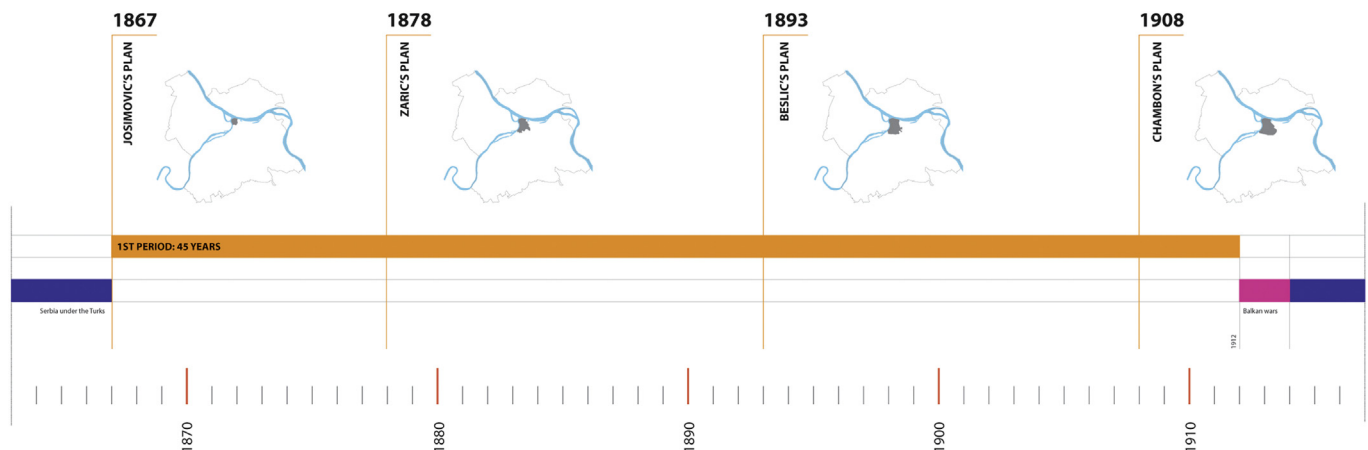


Fig. 2. The first research period between two crises from 1867 to 1914. Source: Vukmirovic (2015).

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