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# The phenomenon of shrinking illegal suburbs in Serbia: Can the concept of shrinking cities be useful for their upgrading?

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## ABSTRACT

Illegal residential construction at the fringes of urban areas has been typical for Serbia and the other countries of South Eastern and Southern Europe, spanning through all periods of modern urbanisation. Illegal suburbs are currently so widespread that they cannot be omitted in any future policy or strategy regarding urban development and planning, land and property management. However, this phenomenon is being transformed over the recent years; after rapid and uncontrolled suburbanisation during the second half of the 20th century, the first shrinking outer suburbs around Serbian cities have appeared recently, with the post-socialist transition of the country. Yet, even more suburbs are in demographic and economic stagnation, emphasising the necessity to tackle it in the near future.

This paper aims to open the debate about the future of illegal residential settlements with shrinking and stagnation patterns in Serbia, connecting this phenomenon with the concept of shrinking cities. Despite this concept being well-known, it is traditionally more oriented towards urban decline in well-developed and organised countries, where it deals with shrinking inner urban areas. Confronting the existing knowledge from the concept with the problems that shrinking outer suburbs in Serbia are facing today, this paper seeks to revise and adjust it by proposing the creative institutional changes for these vulnerable areas that simplify legalisation procedures, better integrate involved stakeholders, connect different spatial levels to form a polycentric network, and support bottom-up initiatives for the socio-economic regeneration of illegal suburbia. Institutional changes can be important for understanding and dealing with expected urban shrinkage in the less developed part of the world, such as in the Global South and fast-developing countries in Eastern Asia, where the problems of illegal suburbia are acute, but which certainly can expect urban shrinkage in the future.

## 1. Introduction

Serbia has had a long history of illegal spatial development, usually in the form of illegal residential settlements at the fringe of major urban areas (Tsenkova, 2005; UNECE, 2006). Illegality in spatial development is one of the major determinants that shape the ex-Yugoslav subtype of post-socialist city, which, together with the other Balkan-located subtypes,<sup>1</sup> possesses elements of Third World development (Petrović, 2005). This problem has been evident for decades, transecting all modern periods: interwar (WW1-WW2), socialist, and post-socialist. It is interesting to point out that illegal construction was present during both capitalist and socialist state systems, with somewhat different “symptoms” (Antonić & Mitrović, 2013). The problem with illegal development has continued during the ongoing period of post-socialist transformation, when territorial governance and planning have had manifest problems with fragility and unpreparedness for new, post-socialist circumstances (Rink et al., 2014).

They have thereby taken an auxiliary position to more powerful private investors (Hirt & Stanilov, 2014). Illegal settlements are so widespread in the cities in Serbia today that they trigger general urban development. Consequently, they cannot be omitted in any future policy or strategy regarding urban planning, land-use development or real estate market (Tsenkova, 2012).

However, some new phenomena have recently occurred in illegal settlements. One is the issue of the ‘first’ shrinking illegal settlements around Serbian cities. Many of these cities witnessed rapid and insufficiently controlled urbanisation during the 20th century, which caused illegal construction in suburban areas (Petovar, 2003). These patterns have changed dramatically with the post-socialist transition, transforming many illegal settlements from the vibrant first “nuclei” of small and medium enterprises in the 1980s and the 1990s to more stigmatised places to live and work today (Tsenkova, 2005). It seems that national development policies have created a negative image of illegal settlements, without

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<sup>1</sup> Romanian, Bulgarian and Albanian cities.

answering the question of how they can be tackled. Some of these settlements are demographically and economically shrinking, and even more are in stagnation with challenging futures.

This paper aims to open the debate about the future of illegal residential settlements with shrinking and stagnation patterns in Serbia, connecting this phenomenon with the concept of shrinking cities. Within this concept, entire urban areas are usually considered as entities, i.e. cities with accompanying suburbia (Luescher & Shetty, 2013). In some cases, this is oriented towards more prominent shrinking urban quarters, such as historic cores and old urban areas (Schettino, 2014). If a post-socialist context is considered, the huge estates of mass housing at urban peripheries with open-block structure (“super-blocks”) are usually studied, due to their notorious decline (Großmann, Haase, Rink, & Steinfuhrer, 2008). These different approaches to the concept have left a little space to examine the case of shrinking illegal suburbia.

The agenda of the paper comprises a detailed explanation of the problem that shrinking illegal suburbs in Serbia are facing. Although illegal settlements are usually related to rapid urbanisation and ‘booming’ cities, there is no specific research of the reverse process; what can be done when the shrinkage of illegal suburbs occurs? Therefore, the authors of the paper expect it to offer a twofold scientific contribution – First, it will contribute locally by supporting the research of illegal spatial development in Serbia through the lens of international knowledge about urban shrinkage; Second, the paper will contribute to research concerning urban shrinkage in the global context, where the issue of illegal suburban settlements has not been paid adequate attention. Therefore, these new insights will further determine how to cope with this phenomenon through creative institutional changes, which can be a role-model for the countries that will face the problems with the shrinkage of illegal settlements in the future.

## 2. Rise and decline of illegal settlements in Serbia

The growth of illegal settlements in Serbia provides an illustrative reflection of modern urban development within the country, which development has been heavily influenced by major historical events in European history during the 20th century (Antonić, 2016). Therefore, the organisation of this study follows the pattern of three main historical periods in the European history of 20th century: the period between the two World Wars; the post WW2 period until the collapse of the Iron curtain; and the following post-socialist period, respectively.

This paper uses the term *illegal* instead of the term *informal*<sup>2</sup> due to the significance of its legal status; illegal settlements usually consist of private-led individual residential projects in the form of detached houses that are located on previously unbuilt land that was intended to be preserved for agriculture or forestry (Mitrović, Ralević, & Antonić, 2014). This type of illegal development can be described as “*construction without building permit but with title to the land*” (Hirt & Stanilov, 2014, p. 85). These buildings have been constructed on building plots that are almost routinely acquired on the basis of inheritance or purchased from previous owners, but are without the relevant building permission issued by an appropriate authority (Tsenkova, 2005). Other characteristics regarding their physical and functional informality, typical of slums and shanty towns in developing countries, are not present in these cases.<sup>3</sup> They can even have some features that are better than those in legal settlements.<sup>4</sup> Their (il)legal status causes their

<sup>2</sup> The unofficial and colloquially widespread name for such settlements is different – *wild settlements* (Serb. *Дивље насеље*).

<sup>3</sup> The only case which differs greatly from this description is the Roma settlements, which look like slums in developing countries across the world (Vuksanović-Macura, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the percentage of greenery is greater than in the inner ‘legal’ areas and the plots are not usually overbuilt (Antonić & Mitrović, 2015). Similarly, the usual floor space per occupant/tenant in these settlements is above the national average (SORS, 2014).

vulnerability in the sphere of urban planning, with restricted communal and social infrastructure and services (Mojović, 2011). Finally, the latest *Law on Legalisation* mainly deals with the problem of legal status of the structures, regardless of the other problematic issues in the sphere of their (MCTI, 2015). These reasons determine the priority of the aspect of legality for Serbian illegal settlements.

### 2.1. History of illegal construction in Serbian urbanisation

Just after the end of World War I, the territory of current Serbia was consolidated as a unity from the former Kingdom of Serbia and the southernmost districts of the Kingdom of Hungary, within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia<sup>5</sup> (Kamusella, 2009). The formation of a new and very spacious country fuelled the rise of a capitalist economy and the development of major cities, Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš. In contrast, smaller cities and towns, were still dependent on small entrepreneurs and a craft-driven economy, that in-the-main stalled during this period (Djukić, 1998).

As a consequence, rapid urbanisation occurred in three major cities. For example, the population of Belgrade tripled in just 23 years (Vučetić, 2010). However, controlled and planned urban growth was hindered by the underdeveloped state of the country, which was devastated during the WW1. Thus, slums and squatter settlements blossomed in the outer parts of Serbian cities (Fig. 1), encompassing almost half of the urban population in major Serbian cities during the interwar period (WW1–WW2). A typical example was Jatagan-Mala in Belgrade (Vuksanović-Macura & Macura, 2016). Later, many of these settlements were gradually transformed or cleaned up to make space for the socialist estates of mass housing.

Rapid urbanisation and demographic explosion continued during after World War II, in Socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991). However, this process had a somewhat different pattern. Rapid urbanisation was also evident in small and medium-sized cities and towns. The trend was not driven just by simple socioeconomic reasons; the socialist elite in Yugoslavia ideologically promoted this “urbocentric policy” (Petovar, 2003). Numerous superblocks in peripheral parts of Serbian cities with high-rise residential projects were the most obvious result of rapid urbanisation during the socialist era.

Nevertheless, the socialist Yugoslavia was a unique society in socialist Europe (Pichler Milanović, 1999). It was in contact with Western Europe, which enabled decentralisation of the state, more freedom and better living standard for the citizens (Petrović, 2004; Stanilov, 2007). This uniqueness was officially termed “socialist self-government” (Blander, 1997).

The decentralisation, undertaken in late socialism, gave both significant independence and wide obligations to local level (municipalities) in urban and housing policy (Hirt & Stanilov, 2014). In many cases, urban municipalities could not cope with the rapid increase of population from rural areas. New urban dwellers resolve their housing needs illegally by using this situation to build their houses illegally in suburban areas, where there were no strict planning codes and the building control was weak (Archer, 2016) (Fig. 2). The state tolerated this kind of illegal residential construction, which was for existential purposes (Ferenčak, 2006; Petovar, 2003). The result of this unplanned and illegal growth of suburban areas was uncontrolled urban sprawl (Zeković et al., 2015). Aside from the main trajectory of illegal growth, numerous small home-based and family-driven economic enterprises appeared during the 1980s (Petrović, 2004).

The last period was a post-socialist transformation, which has brought about the radical transformation of post-socialist cities throughout the whole region (Pickvance, 2008). The post-socialist transition has not been quite successful in the case of Serbia. During the 1990s, the transition was halted by the Yugoslav wars (1991–2001) and

<sup>5</sup> Firstly, known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 1918–1929.

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