

Autocratisation-Driven Urban Transformation: The Case of Novi Sad, Serbia

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Abstract

Autocratisation is on the rise, undermining democratic institutions and reshaping sociopolitical landscapes worldwide. This article situates urban transformation within this trend and argues that urban transformation should be reconceptualised, particularly in countries facing advanced democratic erosion, such as Serbia. It proposes a shift from the prevailing focus on neoliberalism and economic exploitation towards an emphasis on autocratisation and political domination. To lay the groundwork for this reconceptualisation, the article explores how urban spaces, institutions, discourses, and actors contribute to both democratic erosion and resilience. In doing so, it links contemporary urban transformation directly to the process of autocratisation. As a case study illustrating the relevance of this new approach, the article presents preliminary empirical findings from Novi Sad, a second-tier Serbian city, focusing on the waterfront redevelopment and other major infrastructure projects that exemplify democratic erosion and provoke democratic contention.

Keywords

autocratisation; democratic resilience; Novi Sad Waterfront project; railway station canopy collapse; urban planning

1. Introduction

Democracy is facing a global decline often referred to as the “third wave of autocratisation” (see Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This trend is evident in Europe, where EU candidate countries (such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and over 20% of EU member states (including Hungary, Poland, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Greece) are experiencing significant democratic erosion (Bochsler & Juon,

2020; Boese et al., 2021). Autocratisation is a process in which political actors individually or collectively undermine democratic principles, making political power more arbitrary and repressive, often under the guise of legality (Tomini et al., 2023). They rely on democratic institutions, rather than overtly authoritarian measures, to erode democratic norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). About 70% of cases in the third wave of autocratisation involve this gradual institutional erosion, with Hungary and Serbia as prominent examples (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

The debate surrounding the new wave of autocratisation in Europe is shaped by methodological nationalism, providing a broad picture of political trends at the national level based on state-level institutions, such as elections, parliaments, and the media. A more nuanced, spatially sensitive approach that recognises sub-national variations has been less explored, particularly within urban spaces. This is partly due to the widespread assumption that cities serve as “islands of resistance” against authoritarianism (Aksztejn et al., 2024; Buzogány & Spöri, 2024), overlooking their role in consolidating autocratic power.

This research aims to fill that gap by examining how urban spaces, institutions, discourses, and actors contribute to democratic erosion and resilience. It links urban dynamics directly to autocratisation and shows how this process drives urban transformation and how different urban actors attempt to counter such trends. The focus of this study is Novi Sad, a second-tier city in Serbia, the Novi Sad Waterfront project (NSWP), and other major infrastructure projects, such as the railway station reconstruction, that exemplify democratic erosion and provoke democratic contention.

While urban megaprojects (UMPs) are often promoted as economic achievements or criticised for fostering economic injustices, this research focuses on their role in democratic erosion. UMPs are not only tools for economic gain but also for consolidating autocratic power and right-wing populism (Beveridge et al., 2024). At the same time, they provoke public opposition, making them key arenas for studying both democratic erosion and resilience at the urban level. This article argues that urban infrastructural projects are crucial sites where democratic erosion unfolds and where reservoirs of democratic resilience may form in response. Despite their political significance, UMPs have been underexplored in political science and are often viewed primarily through an economic lens as manifestations of neoliberalism in urban studies.

The structure of the article is as follows: Following the introduction, the second section reviews the existing research on UMPs in the Balkans. The third section presents the concepts of democratic erosion and resilience within the urban context. The fourth section introduces and analyses the NSWP, while the fifth section presents the methodology. The sixth section discusses the results, and the final section summarises and concludes the article, underscoring the further need to explore the relationship between cities and autocratisation.

2. UMPs and Planning in the Balkans: Between Neoliberalism and Autocratisation

Most of the recent literature on UMPs in the Balkans draws from the example of the Belgrade Waterfront project (BWP) constructed by Abu Dhabi-based investor Eagle Hills, shifting the debate towards geopolitical relations and new patterns of neoliberal globalisation in this region (Koelemaj, 2021). It has been argued that “the introduction of specific legal and policy instruments in Serbia under neoliberal economic pressures is a key source of the future change in the metropolitan tissue” (Zeković et al., 2018, p. 159). The BWP is being

driven by the pursuit of extra profits for developers in a context of “wild neoliberalism” in which “authorities become partners to foreign investors; spatial planners lack the strength to resist such partnerships, allowing public interest to be drowned in the whirlpool of private sector needs” (Perić, 2020, p. 220). Similarly, it has been argued that social movements resisting this project, such as Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own, are built on a “platform[s] of resistance to neoliberal state-building,” with a strong emphasis on social inequalities resulting from intensive economic stratification (Džuverović & Milošević, 2021, p. 199). Thus, the project is mostly viewed within the context of deregulation and neoliberal globalisation.

This focus on neoliberalism, which seeks to explain urban transformation in relation to capital accumulation, may be excessive and misleading in Central and Eastern Europe (Gentile & Sjöberg, 2020; Kinossian, 2022), especially in countries experiencing significant democratic erosion, such as Serbia. In contrast to Western-based UMPs, which are driven by entrepreneurial and globally competitive local governments and explained primarily through the lens of neoliberalism (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), UMPs in Central and Eastern Europe are particularly significant for nation-state politics (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019; Kinossian & Morgan, 2023). As Olt et al. (2024) attest, many urban infrastructure projects in Hungary primarily reinforce neo-patrimonial relations rather than accumulating profits for capitalists. Thus, post-socialist megaprojects “often say more about political ambition than of burgeoning markets, good investment climate or a strong role of private capital” (Kinossian, 2022, p. 1244).

This dynamic may be missed by research focused only on capital cities as centres of intense urban concentration, especially in the European context with a more balanced network of cities. This raises the question of the unique role second-tier cities—the largest cities in a country, excluding the capital—may play in autocratisation. Given the focus on the capital, authoritarian control may be less pronounced in secondary cities. This scenario may make it easier for urban movements and opposition groups to organise, albeit with fewer resources. Additionally, national governments may employ diverse strategies in different locales, potentially allowing for isolated pockets of freedom (Koch, 2022), and second-tier cities may play a role in this case. They may serve as democratic facades strategically deployed to bolster regime legitimacy on a wider scale. Conversely, second-tier cities may also function as playgrounds for realising autocratic projects, with coalition-building efforts often serving as test beds for the national level (Massetti & Schakel, 2021). However, detecting these dynamics proves challenging due to a lack of previous research.

3. Democratic Erosion, Resilience, and UMPs

Democratic erosion is the modal tactic of the third wave of autocratisation and refers to the gradual but substantial undermining of democratic norms without abolishing key democratic institutions (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Contrary to the widespread belief that autocratisation occurs suddenly and violently, contemporary democracies erode through subtle, gradual changes as seen in Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and North Macedonia (Freedom House, 2024). They have been experiencing a continuous process in which political parties exploit structural deficiencies to tilt the electoral playing field through the use of illiberal governing practices while maintaining competitive elections (Kapidžić, 2020). The key mechanisms of democratic erosion identified in the literature (Boese et al., 2021; Dahl, 1984; Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023) include undermining or subverting democratic institutions and procedures and targeting or co-opting opponents.

Democratic resilience is the ability of a democratic system and its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or respond to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults (Lührmann & Merkel, 203). It is based on the safeguards of democracy, which include the formal electoral process and voter turnout, freedom of expression and association, a free press, and an independent parliament and judiciary (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Democratic resilience can be manifested as resistance against autocratisation and defined as any activity or combination of activities undertaken by a dynamic set of often interconnected and interacting actors who, regardless of their motivations, attempt to slow down, stop, or reverse the actions of those responsible for autocratisation (Tomini et al., 2023).

The following section explores the various ways in which democratic erosion and resilience relate to urban spaces, institutions, actors, and discourses. This analytical approach is based on the ASID model for analysing socio-economic development (Moulaert et al., 2016). The four interconnected concepts—agency, structure, institutions, and discourse—are crucial to understand socio-economic development in space, as they encompass actions, constraints, guiding institutions, and discursive practices. In this article, the ASID model is adapted to the specifics of urban infrastructure research by replacing the “structure” dimension with “space.” To more effectively identify urban actors, the “agency” dimension is modified to “actors.” Following Moulaert et al. (2016, p. 169), our analytical framework, therefore, consists of:

1. Space (spatial structures), referring to “those aspects of natural and/or social realities that cannot be changed by a given individual or collective agency in the short to medium term within a specific spatial context”;
2. Institutions, referring to a “more or less coherent set of routines, practices, rules, and sanctions governing specific domains of action”;
3. Actors, defined as agents of “meaningful human behavior, individual or collective, that significantly impacts the natural and/or social worlds, either directly or through mediation by tools, institutions, or other means”;
4. Discourse, that is, the “production of intersubjective sense-making.”

3.1. Spaces

The construction of UMPs radically transforms residential areas, abandoned industrial sites, and urban commons by altering their functions, socio-ecological structures, and aesthetics. It can contribute to autocratic consolidation as a regime secures the support of economic oligarchs through lucrative construction contracts and legitimises itself before domestic and international audiences by projecting an image of progress through highly visible spatial symbols. This can be purely speculative, as the regime capitalises on the profit expectations of financial actors and the desire for change expressed by the citizens, as seen in the Skopje 2014 project in North Macedonia (Mattioli, 2020). The socio-spatial consequences include gentrification, residential segregation, and spatial injustices, which arise from increased land values and the displacement of vulnerable populations (Monte-Mór et al., 2020, pp. 1–4; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Deepening inequalities erode trust in political institutions and can lead to a rejection of democracy, creating a fertile ground for authoritarianism (Stiglitz, 2023). Conversely, redevelopment areas can serve as foundations for mobilising resistance and resilience, given the place attachment and identity that citizens develop with these spaces. The creation or preservation of such counter-spaces is crucial for building alternative political imaginaries and fostering oppositional publics (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2018).

3.2. Institutions

UMPs are often implemented through regulatory exceptions that undermine democratic processes in urban planning (Can & Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2023; Perić, 2020; Zeković & Maričić, 2022), typically by bypassing or manipulating public consultations and citizen participation. This bypassing of standard procedures can marginalise public input and weaken institutional checks and balances, thereby triggering wider democratic erosion in society, reducing democratic control, and expanding the political dominance of autocratic leaders (Staletović, 2022). However, these findings have not been directly connected to the broader erosion of democracy. Instead, planning manipulations have been interpreted as driven by external pressure—the interests of private investors outweighing the public good and explained within a neoliberal context.

3.3. Actors

Urban actors are individuals and groups with specific interests in the city, acting within economic, political, cultural, or social spheres. UMPs involve a range of actors, including citizens, economic actors (such as investors and developers), political actors (such as decision-makers, political parties, social movements, and citizens), and experts (in architecture and urban planning). In this dimension, “democratic erosion” can be conceptualised as the centralisation of the decision-making process towards the central level of government (Coppedge, 2017; Ergenc & Yuksekkaya, 2022) and the power dynamic involving the suppression of freedom, targeting of opponents, and co-opting of support (Goodfellow & Jackman, 2020). By contrast, urban civic engagement and networking between oppositional urban movements and local governments can be observed as urban manifestations of democratic resilience (Matthes, 2023; Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022). This kind of urban contention can force incumbents to acknowledge electoral defeat, challenge electoral fraud, tie opposition actors to citizens, and create effective mobilisation structures (Norton, 2024).

3.4. Discourses

UMPs are legitimised through hegemonic discourses (Kaye-Essien & Bhuiyan, 2022) shaped by elite visions for the future. These narratives often portray the ruling class’s interests as universal benefits, accompanied by excessive optimism and the misrepresentation of social advantages while downplaying the challenges involved (Casellas & Lehtonen, 2024). This can obscure corrupt practices within UMPs while emphasising the regime’s capacity to generate economic prosperity, as seen in the narratives of urban boosterism. In an era of rising authoritarianism and populism, these discourses may be influenced by nationalism, climate scepticism, and the “gender backlash” (Siemiatycki et al., 2020) that justify social exclusion and reinforce existing hierarchies. Conversely, urban discourses framed around democratisation and environmentalist narratives, as well as non-normative counter-narratives generated by oppositional and marginalised groups and individuals, can also reflect democratic resilience.

4. Novi Sad Urban Infrastructure Projects: Contextual Remarks

The sociopolitical context in Serbia is shaped by the blocked post-socialist transformation (Lazić, 2000) that began in the 1990s, during which the country experienced civil wars and waves of democratisation and de-democratisation. Since 2014, Serbia has been classified as a hybrid regime with ongoing democratic erosion (Castaldo, 2020), that has only recently been challenged by anti-corruption, student-led protests

(Beširević, 2025; Zaharijević, 2025). The significant backsliding began in 2012 under Aleksandar Vučić's government, characterised by attacks on the independent judiciary and essential safeguards, ultimately leading to the breakdown of the electoral process (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023). Over the last decade, provincial and local autonomy has deteriorated under the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS; see Đukanović, 2016; M. Petrović, 2010). The SNS has maintained complete control over all major urban centres in the country. The national government plays a central role in urban transformation in Serbia due to the high centralisation and concentration of power within the ruling party.

This political context frames or exacerbates post-socialist urban transformation (J. Petrović & Backović, 2019), which is marked by increased socioeconomic inequalities, rising urban poverty, informal urban practices, illegal adaptations of urban spaces, a more permissive approach to planning, and urban depopulation in non-capital cities (M. Petrović, 2005; Stanilov, 2007). Although heavily influenced by European trends (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2024) spatial planning in Serbia and across the Western Balkans continues to be deeply rooted in its historical trajectory (Berisha & Cotella, 2024). Such a legacy is often associated with a democratic deficit in these societies, which can be exploited to fuel further democratic erosion in a new wave of autocratisation (Bunce et al., 2009).

The construction and urban planning sectors are key areas in which corruption thrives, both in Serbia (Ristanović, 2023) and across other Western Balkan countries (Mattioli, 2020). In Serbia, this is enabled by key weaknesses in the spatial planning system, which include inadequate implementation of spatial plans and a lack of horizontal (and vertical) coordination (Zivanovic & Gataric, 2021). A report from an independent agency, the Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute (RERI), emphasises that corruption in the planning and construction sector in Serbia involves:

The abuse of public authority in the process of drafting and adopting urban and spatial plans, as well as in issuing permits and approvals for construction and project implementation. This occurs through actions, inactions, or direct violations of laws and procedures, leading to significant harm to the public interest, undermining democracy and the rule of law, and threatening public resources and human and civil rights. At the same time, it facilitates the pursuit of interests by individuals or select groups. (Ristanović, 2023, p. 7)

The report identifies several mechanisms that violate institutional democratic procedures and enable corruption in this sector in Serbia. These include the fragmentation of planning documents in which planning acts are divided into separate sectoral areas or territorial parts, obstructing the assessment of the planning solutions' mutual impacts. RERI also notes deficiencies or the outright absence of strategic environmental assessment reports. Planning hierarchies are reversed, and lower-level plans that violate planning regulations are legitimised by their inclusion in higher-level planning acts, thus tailoring public interests to individual agendas. The abuse of special planning procedures shortens timelines and circumvents mandatory early public insight, and deviations from technical documentation and building permits create significant discrepancies between approved plans and actual construction. Furthermore, the lack of relevant inspection services exacerbates these issues. Together, these mechanisms contribute to a system that fosters corruption and undermines public trust in the planning and construction process.

Although such violations of democratic procedures are often seen as a result of investor-driven urbanism in which public interest, represented by democratically elected officials, is subordinated to private economic

gains, they also contribute directly to the centralisation of power in the ruling party, reinforcing authoritarianism. Control over urban planning and construction allows the regime to strategically develop certain areas while neglecting others, thereby displacing or suppressing communities critical of the government and rewarding loyal supporters. Authorities can further ensure that urban infrastructure aligns with their political agenda, as seen in the prioritisation of churches, national monuments, and other symbols of ideological significance. As they position themselves as the primary gatekeepers of the planning process, political interests may even take precedence over the private economic interests of investors, who are compelled to align their projects with the regime's political goals. Additionally, corruption in planning fosters patronage networks in which government officials reward loyalists with lucrative contracts and favourable treatment, creating a cycle of dependence and support that sustains the regime (Vuković & Spaić, 2022). Ultimately, authorities benefit from being perceived as the drivers behind major infrastructure projects, which legitimises their rule and presents a façade of urban development.

This façade broke in November 2024 when a newly reconstructed train station canopy in Novi Sad collapsed, resulting in the death of 16 people. The reconstruction was a part of the major infrastructural project—the construction of a high-speed railway connecting Belgrade and Budapest—carried out through contracts based on an intergovernmental agreement between Serbia and China. These agreements are exempt from domestic laws requiring public tenders, allowing for direct negotiations with subcontractors, often under confidentiality clauses. The investor of the reconstruction project was a state-owned company, Serbian Railways Infrastructure, the main contractor was a Chinese consortium, while most subcontractors who conducted the reconstruction were Serbian firms with close ties to the ruling party (“Dević ATP Vojvodina,” 2024), a pattern also observed in Hungary (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023). A series of procedural and financial irregularities during the reconstruction (Transparency Serbia, n.d.) raised suspicions of corruption, suggesting that the regime exploits intergovernmental agreements and urban infrastructure projects as a means to divert public funds to loyal individuals in exchange for their support, thereby reinforcing its control at the expense of public well-being and safety. The authorities’ refusal to disclose full documentation related to the reconstruction or to hold those responsible accountable triggered nationwide student-led anti-corruption protests, which are still ongoing. This underscores the deep connection between urban infrastructure projects and the persistence of the authoritarian regime, while also highlighting their potential as sites of resistance.

Novi Sad, the administrative centre of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Serbia’s key agricultural region, has a population of approximately 350,000, making it the country’s second-largest city. Like many other Serbian cities, Novi Sad’s industry collapsed in the 1990s and only began to recover in the 2000s. The city is developing unequally, with a booming construction sector amid the lack of basic infrastructure in the urban peripheries, such as sanitation or sewage systems, and many substandard or illegally constructed buildings (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2019; Pušić, 2008). Overbuilding, environmental neglect, and luxury housing developments have deteriorated living conditions and deepened inequalities, contributing to urban de-development (Hughson, 2015; Pušić, 2008). Unlike urban development, which enhances infrastructure and quality of life, urban de-development leads to the degradation of urban spaces and quality of life, manifesting in the loss of cultural heritage, displacement of residents, and environmental degradation.

The NSWPP is an example of this trend. It was developed as a counterpart to the larger and more widely recognised BWP. However, being situated in a second-tier city, and not yet realised, it has attracted less

attention in the literature despite the wide public discussion involving academia and professional organizations. Both the Belgrade and Novi Sad waterfronts are large-scale, state-led UMPs in which private investors construct exclusive and luxurious housing complexes along the riverfronts, yielding substantial profits and creating opportunities for corruption. In both projects, the state unilaterally amends or bypasses local democratic procedures and institutions, such as land use regulations and public participation in urban planning. The BWP was developed in a populated urban neighbourhood through land rezoning and alterations to the general urban plan (GUP). The violent removal of buildings occurred to accommodate investors, effectively excluding the local community from decision-making processes. A critical incident in 2016 saw a group of masked individuals unlawfully demolish private buildings within the designated project area while the police remained unresponsive to the citizens' pleas for help. These dramatic events in which the rule of law was suspended and citizens' rights were violated serve as an example of democratic erosion contested by a series of protests that grew into an urban movement called Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022).

In Novi Sad, a similar process of authoritarian control over urban politics and the emergence of contentious urban movements is underway. Unlike in Belgrade, the developer of the NSWP is a domestic investor with close ties to the authorities, making it particularly suitable for analysing urban transformation in the context of autocratisation.

5. Methods and Analytical Approach

This exploratory study addressed a case that has not been widely examined before. Thus, we relied on one recent article discussing the NSWP (Čamprag, 2024) and insights from the practice, coupled with the qualitative analysis of secondary data obtained from various sources, including media content, urban planning documents, expert reports, and official statements from politicians and city authorities who advocate for the NSWP, as well as from investor representatives, opposition leaders, activists, and experts who oppose it. The data were interpreted within the conceptual framework of democratic erosion and resilience taking place within urban spaces, institutions, actors, and discourses to point out how those elements are mobilised to consolidate and challenge autocratic tendencies. The materials analysed were collected during the long-term monitoring of the project preparation process, which began with the initial steps towards the adoption of the Novi Sad GUP, in which the project was proposed and later approved in 2022, continuing through to the present. Although this work did not rely on the collection of primary data, it offers a new conceptual framework for further research on autocratisation in urban settings. Furthermore, it mapped out key spaces, discourses, institutions, and actors through which autocratisation unfolds by using the case study of the UMP in the second-tier post-socialist city of Novi Sad.

6. Results: NSWP: Spaces, Institutions, Actors, Discourses

6.1. Spaces

The NSWP plans to construct a luxury residential and commercial complex with buildings up to 20 stories high, spanning an area of 22 hectares in the abandoned post-industrial zone of the former city shipyard along the Danube River. Low-value industrial land is being sold to investors and converted for high-value residential and commercial use, thereby realising substantial profits within a short time frame. In 2017, the shipyard was

privatised and sold to Galens, a local company with close ties to the city authorities. According to estimates, the NSWP will include around 2,299 apartments, with the total planned building area covering 39,600 square meters (Prca Kovacevic, 2022).

The planned complex will be situated near Liman—a neighbourhood built during the socialist era, following the urban planning practices of the time. These practices ensured the development of social infrastructure within the residential blocks, such as health centres, community spaces, libraries, kindergartens, and parking spaces. Since the NSWP plans to build luxury housing but lacks similar facilities, not only would it exacerbate spatial inequalities, but it may also overburden the social infrastructure of the neighbouring post-socialist district. Liman is an oppositional neighbourhood in which a prolonged struggle has been waged to gain control over the lowest levels of local self-governance, namely the local community councils (Ostojić, 2024).

In addition to the new residential and commercial complex, the plan also includes a major overhaul of the city's road infrastructure, including the construction of a new bridge to connect the city centre with the Fruška Gora Corridor, a project that is already underway and being built by the Chinese company.

The project is situated on a natural reserve area along the Danube, which is crucial for ecosystem preservation and flood defence. This low-lying area of land adjacent to the Danube is subject to flooding and plays a critical role in natural water management. Close to this site is Šodroš, a green urban oasis with significant social and ecological functions, including biodiversity protection, which will be radically transformed due to the planned spatial interventions. The place attachments to the urban space targeted for redevelopment by the NSWP play a key role in mobilising citizen groups against the project.

6.2. Institutions

The NSWP was facilitated through the undermining of democratic procedures in urban planning and control and the manipulation of key institutions. The key aspects of democratic erosion are evident in the procedures surrounding the adoption of the Novi Sad GUP, which preceded the project, as well as in local, national, and international regulations concerning environmental protection along the Danube riverbanks and in political control over public companies, such as public water management.

The Novi Sad GUP for 2030 facilitated the NSWP. The plan states that “the former shipyard, located in a highly attractive and valuable location, has not been functional for many years, which raises the need to reconsider the purpose of this land” (Conic, 2021). Serbia's Law on Planning and Construction provides only two mechanisms for public participation in the planning process: early public insight and public insight with an accompanying public hearing of the Planning Commission. However, the way these mechanisms are defined allows institutions to disregard or misuse the regulations, reducing public participation to a mere formality devoid of any meaningful influence on the planning process (Stojić et al., 2020). In the case of the GUP, the city of Novi Sad skipped one of the most crucial steps in drafting and adopting planning documents: organising early public insight. This omission deprived the public of the opportunity to influence planning decisions and propose alternatives, thereby violating legal procedures and the principles of public participation (Rajić, 2022). Institutional non-transparency and the reduction of public participation to the bare legal minimum create fertile ground for corruption to thrive (Ristanović, 2023).

Furthermore, this project expands flood-prone areas and increases the city's exposure to climate change risks, which are especially pronounced in the Balkans. This implies violations of environmental regulations. Construction at this location directly violates Serbia's Regulation on Establishing the Spatial Plan for Areas of Special Purpose of the International Waterway E 80—Danube (Pan-European Corridor VII), adopted in 2015. This regulation commits the state to (a) restoring sections of the Danube and its tributaries to their natural state, including re-establishing floodplains, reconnecting wetlands and retention areas, and minimising the impact of new projects on the physical degradation of ecosystems, and (b) protecting, conserving, and restoring biodiversity and various habitats, particularly for rare and endangered species, as well as the unique ecosystem of the Danube Delta. Although the regulation mandated the initiation of protection processes and the designation of this area as a protected natural asset, the city of Novi Sad never issued a protection act, nor was the area designated as protected by the Provincial Institute for Nature Protection (Stojković Jovanović, 2020). This inaction was preceded by a report claiming that the area lacked the characteristics necessary for protection, which was never made publicly available (Stojković Jovanović, 2020).

In addition to breaching the 2015 regulation, the project violates several national and international laws, agreements, and protocols, including the Water Law, the Public Property Law, and the Environmental Protection Law. These violations concern the exploitation of a floodplain area with an ecologically significant ecosystem along an international waterway (Stojković Jovanović, 2020).

The construction of a bridge over the Danube in Novi Sad exemplifies these systemic regulatory failures. The bridge project overlaps with several protected areas. In this case, RERI discovered falsified data intended to bypass the preparation of a strategic impact assessment report. Under Serbian law, such actions constitute a criminal offence (Ristanović, 2023). Despite the irregularities, the Institute for Urbanism of Novi Sad announced early public insight about the bridge's planning document (PGR) concept only three weeks after the decision to create the PGR was made. The public review lasted from 29 June to 13 July 2020, a period that severely limited meaningful public participation.

The designation of the bridge project as one of national importance triggered the application of the Law on Special Procedures for the Realisation of Construction and Reconstruction Projects of Linear Infrastructure of Special Importance for the Republic of Serbia. This designation obligates all state authorities, local governments, companies, public enterprises, and other institutions to expedite the issuance of relevant acts without delay, leaving no room for thorough public participation or compliance with environmental standards. After the public water management company issued a negative opinion on the project, the director of the company was dismissed, after which the decision was revised to a positive one. A similar scenario unfolded at the national level: The Jaroslav Černi Institute, Serbia's leading research institution in the field of water management, issued a positive opinion on the planned work, which came shortly after the institute was privatised earlier in the year (Ranocchiari, 2022).

6.3. Actors

The main investor of the NSWP is Galens. This is a domestic investor operating mainly in Serbia and focusing on large residential and commercial complexes in Belgrade and Novi Sad, as well as in winter tourist resorts across the country. The company is the principal investor in the majority of new residential and commercial developments in Novi Sad, and it has effectively driven the city's spatial and infrastructural transformation

since the mid-2000s: “In Novi Sad alone, Galens owns tens of thousands of square meters of both construction land and green spaces or fields on the city’s outskirts, which, over time and through regulatory changes, are reclassified into building plots” (Lalić, 2021). Property prices in these new residential complexes are significantly higher than in other parts of the city that were developed before the 2000s transition period, increasing socio-spatial inequalities.

While the city government serves as the primary promoter of this project through its urban planning institutions, the relationship between the local and national authorities reflects a high degree of centralisation. In other words, the local government functions merely as an extension of the national government in this case, as it lacks real power and autonomy in decision-making related to the project. Despite prolonged urban contention lasting over seven years, urban politics in Novi Sad remain largely under the control of competitive authoritarian governments and the opposition has only recently secured a seat in the local parliament.

The massive deforestation that preceded the NSWP triggered a series of protests, which grew into the Ecological Front urban movement. Initially organised as the informal citizen group Dunavac-Šodroš, activists established the Šodroš Survival Camp at this location in an effort to prevent deforestation (Ranocchiari, 2022). This initiative helped consolidate various neighbourhood movements that had long been fighting against similar spatial interventions in different parts of the city, which led to the formation of the citizen movement Bravo. This demonstrates that spatial transformations initiated or facilitated by an authoritarian political regime drive the consolidation, unification, and scaling up (Pajvančić-Cizelj, 2022) of urban movements, positioning them as one of the main opposition forces against the autocratisation at the local and national levels.

6.4. Discourses

The legitimisation of various urban infrastructure projects in Serbia by the ruling party is taking place through two primary discourses, both aimed at justifying such interventions to the public.

The first discourse revolves around devaluing spaces built or developed during the socialist era, which are typically the focus of reconstruction efforts. These spaces are often discursively framed as neglected, underutilised, and dangerous, paving the way for their transformation under autocratic leadership. The second discourse draws on narratives of Europeanisation, linking new spatial interventions to Europe and the path towards it.

In the case of the BWP, this narrative is apparent in numerous statements by officials, who described the area where the project was developed as devastated. This discursive cleansing of spaces is emblematic in Serbian political life, encapsulated by the slogan “Snakes, Rats, and Drug Addicts,” which Šterić (2021) identifies as a mechanism contributing to state capture. Simultaneously, urban infrastructure projects are often branded as European, standing in stark contrast to the degraded post-socialist infrastructure. The BWP, for example, has been repeatedly positioned as a counterpart to urban developments in European cities. This is evidenced by Serbian President Vučić’s claim:

Now we have a magnificent part of the city with the most beautiful promenade, even better than Vienna's. I promise that in five years, with water purifiers and sewage systems, the Sava here will be as clear as the Danube in Vienna. ("Vučić i Alabar na objektu," 2023)

At the opening ceremony of the reconstructed Novi Sad railway station, which was originally built in 1964, the provincial government's president highlighted that the reconstruction was carried out according to European standards (Serbian Progressive Party, 2024).

In the case of the NSWP, the discourse involves the cleansing of a post-industrial and post-socialist shipyard around which the project is planned. The former mayor of Novi Sad described this area as "rusty shipyards" and dilapidated barracks of bankrupt construction companies ("Miloš Vučević: Grad ne," 2020). Considering that some of these companies were privatised during the democratic transition of Serbia in the 2000s when the current opposition was in power, the spatial transformation has also been used as a political targeting tool. The intersection of Europeanisation narratives and post-socialist transformation is further reflected in a statement by the former mayor of Novi Sad and the then-current Serbian prime minister:

I assume someone back then would have argued that the shipyard should supposedly be preserved as a symbol of the city, even though it hasn't operated in 15 years and is falling apart. But look at what major European and global cities have done with defunct shipyards—they've transformed them into the most attractive zones for business and living, like London and Copenhagen. ("Vučević announced the construction," 2019)

To further test the idea about the double discursive strategy of urban autocratisation in postsocialist cities, future research should integrate primary data collection, such as interviews with urban actors or discourse analysis, while adopting a more comparative perspective to strengthen the generalizability of findings and extend their relevance beyond the Balkans.

7. Conclusion

While previous studies have primarily analysed large-scale infrastructural projects in post-socialist countries through an economic lens—viewing them as results of external neoliberal pressures or investor-driven urbanism—this article argues for a political reconceptualization, demonstrating how these projects are fundamentally shaped by internally driven autocratic transformation. The value of this perspective was demonstrated through the case of major infrastructural projects in Serbia's second-largest city.

The NSWP illustrates how the transformation of post-industrial spaces into high-value urban developments is directly related to the erosion of democracy under autocratic rule. It highlights corruption, deepening socio-spatial inequalities, disregarding community needs, and undermining democratic urban planning practices, as well as institutional manipulation and violations of environmental regulations, which are all related to the broader erosion of democratic governance. The legitimisation of projects such as the NSWP relies on dual discourses: the devaluation of socialist-era spaces and narratives of Europeanisation. By framing socialist infrastructure as neglected, unsafe, and obsolete, the regime has created a rhetorical foundation for its autocratic spatial interventions. This discursive strategy also targets the opponents by associating them with the previous government, accusing them of neglecting the infrastructure and failing to

modernize it. Simultaneously, the regime employs the narrative of Europeanisation to position such projects as aligning with European standards. These intertwined discourses not only justify controversial projects but also serve as political tools for consolidating the regime's power and discrediting its opponents. However, these interventions have also catalysed the rise of social movements, uniting opposition forces to challenge autocratisation at the local and national levels. Autocratisation-driven urban transformation, thus, accelerates democratic erosion within cities, but also serves as a powerful catalyst for the consolidation of democratic resistance and resilience.

Attempts to maintain a democratic façade through legitimisation, appeals to European standards, keeping but bypassing democratic planning procedures, and controlling expert bodies vividly illustrate the third wave of autocratisation in urban settings. The argument developed here is that spatial transformations in countries undergoing autocratisation need to be viewed as political processes. Understanding how cities and their infrastructures are mobilised as political tools in the process of autocratisation and its reversal is a crucial topic for urban studies and has yet to be fully explored. However, this approach should be seen as complementary, not alternative, to existing frameworks focused on neoliberalism. It does not dismiss the economic context but redirects the attention to the political realm that enables it—a realm that has become increasingly important as autocratisation intensifies.

This article suggests that, contrary to prevailing assumptions about the deregulation of urban planning under neoliberalism—which emphasises the expanding role of private actors—the development of major urban infrastructure projects in Serbia is predominantly driven by an autocratising state. Violations of democratic procedures, institutional control, project promotion and its use for political purposes, and the targeting of opponents all point to greater, rather than lesser, state involvement in infrastructural transformation. Considering the recent case of the railway station canopy collapse in Novi Sad, which had the potential to escalate into one of the largest and most serious protests against the autocratic government in Serbia, it becomes clear that urban infrastructure must receive more—if not central—attention in research on autocratisation and the possibility of its reversal.

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Conflict of Interests

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