

# Belgrade's (Water) Front

Filipa Pajević, PhD McGill, '19

Croatian philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat compares starting a revolution to falling in love: the internal battle between fear and longing mirrors the one fought on the streets of cities and towns - fearing the loss of what we know and yet longing for something else is the common denominator. And much like falling in love, starting a revolution has two possible outcomes: it can either fizzle out like a summer romance, or it can turn into a long-term commitment full of ups and downs and all kinds of obstacles with seemingly few rewards. Now, in Belgrade, Serbia – with its long history of failed love affairs – how does a new generation fall in love with resistance, cross that threshold, and keep the spark alive?

Dobrica Veselinović, political scientist, is a member of a local urban NGO, Ministarstvo Prostora (the Ministry of Space), and is one of the main actors behind Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (Let's not drown/give Belgrade) – a reaction to Belgrade's former-mayoral-candidate-former-state-Prime-Minister-and-now-President Aleksandar Vučić's promise of a better future, a future in the form of a massive and unaffordable residential/commercial complex along the waterfront in central Belgrade.

**FP: What about the Belgrade Waterfront serves as an opportunity to start a wider discussion on how things are being done and dealt with in the city and the country?**

DV: As a collective we were monitoring urban development and looking at different projects, so we were kind of in tune with what has been going on, and when it all began in 2014 we were on alert. Firstly, we didn't believe that something would come out of this project. It was presented in 2012 as part of a mayoral campaign. On the last days of his campaign, Aleksandar Vučić took a boat ride on the river with the ex-mayor of NYC, Rudy Giuliani, whom he invited to Belgrade to present – together – the master plan for Belgrade Waterfront. At that point, we were thinking 'ok, this is crazy, we should try to stop this, but it's probably just an electoral gimmick, a stunt'. In 2014, they started to go further with the plan and introduced another 'big friend' of Vučić – a Sheikh from Abu Dhabi who promised a big investment of €3,5 billion. For us that was the crucial moment. Belgrade Waterfront became a symbol for all that is wrong with the decision-making process and politics in Serbia. Because it is spatial, and therefore visible, we thought it would be good for mobilizing people. How the city is developed

is basically influencing daily life as well as our future, so for us the waterfront project represents everything that is wrong with how the government runs things. A project so big, so visibly corrupt and bereft of common sense can be a trigger for something like a civil movement or platform – that was our idea from the beginning, and I think that we somewhat succeeded in that. We didn't stop the project, but we prepared people to raise a voice.



Source: Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd, 2017

*Ne da(vi)mo Beograd: Eye staring contest – city police and the mascot.*

**FP: Yes, there seems to be a lot of doubt with regard to getting involved in politics in Belgrade. A lot of people are unhappy with the situation but don't know how to get involved, are fearful, and visibly disenchanted with politics. After many years of protests against Milošević in the 90s and early 00s, the assassination of democratic hopeful Zoran Djindjić was a collective buzz kill. People expect the system to be rigged, or they think there's nobody to vote for – how do you deal with this mentality? How do you get people to come out and join you given the reluctance to be active?**

DV: I don't have clear answer to those questions, but I can tell you briefly how we approach these issues of lack of democracy, corruption, nepotism and clientelism. We know that we must confront these issues but not in a broad sense because then we get lost in the sea of very big and very structural problems, so we started with the opposite of that – we started with very small issues and with very visible spatial demonstrations. Belgrade Waterfront is a particular project and a place where you can visibly see those issues manifest – the lack of democracy, the lack of consultation, the lack of dialogue and conversation about

anything basically, and corruption on such an extreme level that you can get a big chunk of land and just hand it over to an unknown private investor. So, for us it was important to point to something visible and use that as a trigger to get involved. Also, we try to make transparent everything that we do in the sense of how we are financed, how all this is organized, so we don't do anything anonymously or using some fake identity. We also publish and disseminate our own material. It's nothing new, but in Serbia we now have a big media blockage, so we created our own newspaper and we distribute it on the street.

**FP: On that note, you have been on the receiving end of a very public smear campaign: you have been accused of being corrupt yourselves, of being financed by foreign interest, and I've also read reports that the symbol of the initiative – the yellow rubber duck – is a global conspiracy against President Vučić. How do you deal with these stories and with being pushed into the spotlight as a target for public skepticism and bashing?**

DV: Well, it's very simple: if you are honest in what you're doing and if that is visible in every step of the process, then you can show that our development is organic. Of course, there is polarity in society that is hard to confront and penetrate, but we have a strong support system. I would say that you must be persistent in your message. The smear campaigns can harm you for a couple of days, weeks, months, but if you are persistent everything sorts itself out. I don't know after how long – maybe years, maybe months – but it seems to me that this pyramid of lies could fall very fast.

**FP: The most recent attempt to dismantle you was the pamphlet urging people not to vote in the presidential election, signed (falsely, of course) by your initiative. Is this the worst that you've encountered?**

DV: I don't know, for me this is not something that is unexpected. There are three tactics that they used against us so far: one, bad publicity in the media; second, they are presenting us with plenty of law cases, so now I, personally, have around 20 cases against me, all of which are nonsense. It's totally crazy and everybody knows it's crazy, but the idea is to put pressure on us also from that angle. The third, which is also connected with the legal framework, is the security angle – on some occasions we would sit with our university professors and notice police there, or someone sitting in the coffee shop or bar and listening in on the conversation. They're not threatening us physically, but they're surveilling us. We asked if our phones were tapped and they responded,

literally, with “it’s top secret”.

**FP: Clearly, you’re onto something. Having said that, how do you personally – or the collective in general – how do you guys keep on? Do you use this as motivation? How do you maintain your enthusiasm?**

DV: I don’t know... I think it’s important to continue because people are looking to us as role models or inspiration for different initiatives and things that they are doing, so one of the incentives is that you cannot stop now because you started something that is even bigger than what you imagined. Another is that we are very horizontally organized, so that we can then distribute the stress not on a couple of people, but on the broader collective. We take turns on media appearances and protests in order to be stronger on attacks. And another one is that we know that we are on the right side. Finally, it’s not something you start and then say, ‘oh it’s too hard for me to continue’, so it’s not so heavy what we experienced so far. I’m not saying that it’s not heavy, but when you consider that people in the past were dying for similar stuff, we are now in a very cozy place with our struggles. It’s sad that we must engage in this kind of struggle in 2017, but that’s another story.



Source: Ne Dai(v)imo Beograd, 2017

*Protest: April, 2017 – following the presidential elections (and the victory of Aleksandar Vučić). Also commemorates one year since the wrecking of the Savamala district to make way for the Belgrade Waterfront project.*

**FP: Going back to the initiative itself, you’ve been structured around specific demands: for instance, you asked for the mayor to step down, for a formal review of the contracts, and for general**

**acknowledgement of the falsehood of the whole ordeal. So, given these demand, first of all how successful have you been so far in getting what you have been asking for, and second, given that you do accomplish these things what do you propose as an alternative?**

DV: We thought at this point that it's very important to be against the project and what the project represents, but in the near future we will start thinking about alternatives not just for the waterfront, but for city politics in general. Another reason for not developing alternatives for the waterfront project is because there are already more than 50 different official plans for the area – in the past it has been a wet dream for architects and urban planners, so we didn't want to say that ours is better somehow. The main idea is to establish a proper dialogue in Belgrade, and get people to talk about what they want built there. The next steps would be to think about alternatives to the political system. This is a dilemma that we are discussing internally: should we go into politics after this? We try to confront and do our best from writing complaints to filing lawsuits ourselves, and applying media pressure and pressure on the streets, but nothing really happens. So, we are facing that dilemma – is this enough or should we engage in the political sphere and by that try to change things from the inside? So, I don't have the answer, but the discussion is on the table and it's hard.

**And that's the question, isn't it? Notwithstanding the valiant efforts of the initiative, is it enough to claim the streets and raise a voice? In resistance, as in love, only time will tell.**

**References:**

Horvat, S. (2016) "The radicality of Love". Polity Press.