Re-framing Serbian identity within a global imaginary:
Nation building through the Belgrade Waterfront project

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Abstract:

The Belgrade Waterfront real estate development project has attracted a considerable amount of interest among scholars from various disciplines in a short period of time. Nevertheless, these works are limited in scope. This paper draws upon existing literature on nation building by first contextualizing it before adding insights from party strategies and cultural studies (with a particular focus on identity issues) research streams. It thus aims to contribute to the nascent debate about how the new ruling elite of Serbia uses such urban projects to emancipate from the nationalist rhetoric and supporting symbols of the 1990s. The main argument of this paper is that state narratives, media coverage and branded icons of Belgrade Waterfront illustrate political regime's switch to the global to contain the national in order to build and publicize its own 'revitalized' idea of the nation and legitimize its take on power. The underlying strategy consists in manipulating individuals' preferences by marginalizing opposition parties. The research design relies on a multi-method approach crossing participant and ethnographic observation over a period of 7 years, as well as a critical analysis of the Serbian regime's discursive strategies and project's branding efforts using an original visual material.

Keywords: nation-building; national identity; party strategies; nation branding; Belgrade Waterfront; Serbia

Introduction

Scholarly studies examining the political purposes and related concerns of large infrastructure projects (comprising real estate and mixed ventures as well as events, such as the Olympic Games and their supporting infrastructure) outside the Western world have substantially increased during the last decade. More specifically, Alekseyeva (2014) outlined the possibilities and risks of trying to build a 'new self-image' without necessarily changing social realities. Her work also adds further arguments to the need to understand the motivations of local authorities

within an extended framework that includes economic concerns as well as branding and image-making models. The debated Sardar Sarovar Dam in India reflects a worldwide concern for developing countries enticing and maintaining foreign investment. The creation of so-called world-class infrastructure contributed to the nation-building project, although not explicitly visible in state narratives (see Luxion, 2017). Chinese authorities have somewhat solved the dilemma between nationalism and consumerist values by opting for a 'global rather than local' architectural platform to spread their national aspirations (Ren, 2008). Using Rogun Dam as a case study, Menga (2016) demonstrated how the Tajik political establishment has used a large hydraulic infrastructure as a political legitimacy building instrument and a vector to settle its idea of the nation into public minds. This body of research has both implicitly and explicitly contributed to informing how nation-building processes and infrastructure projects overlap (leading sometimes to redesign the urban landscape) and the controversies they have generated.

Recently, Serbia 'joined the fray' with Belgrade Waterfront (BW[i]), a "megalomaniac project backed by the promise of Abu Dhabi money" that was "forcefully pushed forward by sidestepping laws and ignoring existing urban fabric, in order to secure the future identity of Serbia and its capital" (Slavković, 2015). In a very short period of time, in addition to massive media exposure in both local and foreign newspapers, it has attracted growing attention from scholars belonging to various disciplines who have devoted substantial efforts to investigating its various facets. As an instrument of urban planning and development, the BW megaproject is a local emanation of the "world city entrepreneurialism" trend in which state actors, real estate developers and foreign financial investors work alongside the other (Koelemaij, 2021). Zeković and Maričić (2018) highlighted associated top-down governance issues such as restricted public participation and growing contestation, which have also been emphasized by Koelemaij and Janković (2019). Ultimately, the project illustrates authoritarian interference and is depicted as a spatial expression of neoliberalism in a post-communist society (Perić, 2020).

The aforementioned studies set out the rationale and objectives of this paper, but because the precise meanings of BW hold between the intricate overlapping of 'post-Yugoslav, post partition, post-conflict' (see Horvat & Štiks, 2015), and post-nationalist issues, renewed international ambitions, and at the same time intelligentsia's authoritarian neoliberal modernization and legitimacy building goals, I suggest looking beyond partisan discourses in order to fully grasp its true scope. This is to argue that the BW aims to assist the Serbian ruling

elite and the Serbs to "[re-]synchronize their historical watch" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 2) with the World. The brutal sequence of events and international sanctions that followed the end of the Yugoslav federation forcefully opposed the philosophy of unity which governed its composition and finally led to the isolation of Serbia (Kulić, 2014). The BW has been contended as the most symbolic modernizing action instigated by Serbia's ruling elite since then, and as such, represents a fertile ground for investigating the discursive strategies applied by the Serbian regime[ii] to support its renewed vision of the Serbian nation since 2012.

I implement an analytic approach to questioning and interpreting the interplay between the gradual evolution of state narratives and the development process of BW from 2012 to 2021. Accordingly, I concentrate on "the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so" (Bevir & Rhodes, 2000, p. 2). Specifically, the nation building meaning-making processes underlying the BW project are explored from a constructivist posture of the triadic statement "*x* represents *y* as *z*" (Fossen, 2019, p. 824) in which 'BW portrays the Serbian nation as cosmopolitan'.

What I have in mind is the dynamic intertwining of globalization and cosmopolitanism. By globalization, I adhere to the following definition: "A process (or set of processes) that embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensivity, intensity, velocity, and impact–generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power" (Held et al., 1999, p. 16). I also endorse the view of Held (2003) for whom cosmopolitanism "defines norms of political regulation and law-making that create powers, rights, and constraints that transcend the claims of nation-states" (p. 514) complemented by that of Levy and Sznaider (2002) who consider cosmopolitanism as a process of 'internal globalization' whereby global matters become part of the local experiences of a growing number of individuals. Conveniently, I do not see a hierarchy between both concepts, but a domain between 'the national' and 'the global', whose *contour* depends on the ways political elites in their respective countries articulate, instrumentalize, and favor them in their daily exercise of power. This is based on the premise that Belgrade is viewed as a "symbolic expression for modernity, resistance, openness and democracy" in which "Us, the City Cosmopolitans" and "Them, the Rural Nationalists" are opposed (Volcic, 2005, p. 639). I also extend this 'new articulation and scale of belonging' by inscribing it in a constructivist political process that integrates the outcomes of globalization[iii]

that are 'de-territorialization' and 'reterritorialization' (Swyngedouw & Cox, 1997), as well as its local historical and socio-cultural legacies and manifestations.

The body of the material produced in this study came from multiple sources. I first methodically examined the documents registered in the official website of the Serban Progressive Party (https://www.sns.org.rs/), Belgrade Waterfront (https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/) and Brash agency and specifically the webpage dedicated to the Belgrade Waterfront project they have been working on (https://brash.agency/projects/belgrade-waterfront/). I have supplemented these sources with the archives (using the '*Beograd na vodi*' entry) of the most popular daily newspaper in Serbia, Politika (https://www.politika.rs). The study period spans from 2012 to 2021.

Then, online articles from various newspapers covering the widest possible range of sensitivities, such as *Radio Televizija Serbije*-RTS (https://www.rts.rs/), Mondo (https://www.mondo.rs), SrbinInfo (https://srbin.info/), Novosti (https://www.novosti.rs), Telegraf (https://www.telegraf.rs), Blic (https://www.blic.rs), and pieces published online in local and foreign newspapers, including Deutsche Welle (DW, Germany), Bankar (Montenegro), and The Guardian (United Kingdom), and news agencies such as Beta and Reuters were screened. Finally, articles and reports from Istinomer, an online fact-checking portal, TV news, and broadcast interviews on YouTube and Studio B (https://studiob.rs) were added.

Visual material comprising pictures taken by the author 'on the spot' was included in the analysis. To the best of our knowledge, a public billboard represents an original material that has not been previously used and analyzed. During the analysis of BW advertisements, I followed the recommendation of Schroeder (2006). I first described the visual layer before interpreting it.

Participant observation was conducted on-site since the first maquette or master plan of BW was unveiled and directly accessible to the public in January-March 2015[iv], and notes from participant observation performed in various locations (the river promenade, cafés, restaurants, etc.) were taken and then analyzed.

Contextualizing nation building in Serbia[v]

Research on nation-building in Serbia, like in the post-Soviet space (see Seliverstova, 2016), has brought to the fore the role of state actors and their influence on the formation of national identity in the society (e.g., Kolstø, 2014; Kuzio, 2001; Leshchenko, 2004; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2005).

Within this framework, 'nation building' is embedded in the consolidation of the state through the development of a shared national identity using symbols and propaganda, and by promoting traditions and folklore (Kolstø, 2006). These processes, according to the 'etatization of nations' model (Gross, 1989; Jovanović, 2014; see also Neuberger, 1977), have driven the creation of modern states in Central and Southeastern Europe, such as Serbia.

At least since Antiquity, the building of nationhood is rooted in the practice of distinguishing one's group from other out-groups (see Hall, 1998). Political communities have been formed by emphasizing national culture and buildings, an authentic "Self" while creating a "significant Other" (Kuzio, 2001, p. 343). This concern, even this necessity, will be found at least since the Peace Treaty program defined by United States President Woodrow Wilson, the 'Wilson's Fourteen Points', whose main principle was the "principle of national self-determination and the right of peoples to 'round of' their nation states" (Jakovina, 2017, p. 300).

As a political entity, the 'second Yugoslavia' was established on November 29, 1945, and was settled on the patriotic doctrine of interethnic 'brotherhood and unity' (*bratstvo i jedinstvo*) (Perica, 2001). Although Yugoslavia left Cominform in 1948, there was no consensus among Yugoslavia's ruling elite over how to relate their ideology to a 'significant Other' that was implicitly the Soviet bloc. Emancipation came quickly (1950s) in the form of an "economic democracy and decentralized, market socialism" (Woodward, 1995, p. xiii) in which mass consumption, inspired by the United States, was a crucial economical and symbolic part of the Yugoslav League of Communists' political agenda. Nevertheless, for better and for worse Yugoslav identity was a construction and, as such, was meant to disband, apart from the economic and social limits of the Yugoslav model. Djokić's (2012) argument is that the existing collective identities of the three dominant ethnic groups–Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes–are the main impediments. As the days of the Yugoslav federation have started being numbered, the alteration in the status of the 'supranational' Yugoslav identification led to a redeployment within the identification matrix and finally to an outbreak of extreme nationalism (Godina, 1998). Fueled by grievances, frustrations, and feelings of oppression, particularly towards Serbian centralization, nations in the various republics finally established their identity by means of delineation from other nationalities (Bruckmuller, 2018).

Progressively, the challenge for Serbia's ruling elites, whether they came from democratic or right-wing camps, was to reimagine the national identity outside its the 1990s nationalist

heritage and distant from emotionally charged historical references. Over the last decade, Serbia's political establishment under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić has solved the dilemma between political ideology and economic pragmatism (Gertner, 2007) through mega-infrastructure projects, such as the BW. The latter represents an opportunity to reconcile the supposed conflict between cosmopolitan ideals and national sentiment (see Beitz, 1983). At first glance, the (authoritarian) modernization and more inclusive ideology carried by the Serbian ruling elite through the BW borrows from the Yugoslav integration of liberal universalism into a bordered nation-state (see Kuzio 2001), but without any ethnocultural alterity. Moreover, as I aim to show it, state narratives and the BW branding campaign illustrate a clear dichotomy between those that support the modernization (the 'moderns') and those who 'resist' it (the 'ancients'). Furthermore, the BW, like all actions undertaken by the government, has been transformed into a life-size and quasi-permanent test of legitimacy, due to the relatively low legitimacy resulting from the ballot box.

Building a new horizon for Serbia

Subsequent to the breakdown of communist one-party systems and the end of the Yugoslav experiment, the Western Balkan region experienced an intensive period of collective introspection, during which political elites reinterpreted their current identity bases to suit the new nationalist agenda (Pauković & Raos, 2020).

During the years that followed the post-5th October revolution, broken promises and the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić finally led anthropologist Zagorka Golubović to bitterly comment "We are still without a vision' (Sretenović, 2008), as Serbian society struggled to reconnect to the rest of the world. Paradoxically, the homogeneous ethnic and religious structure of the Serbian state, as well as macroeconomic indicators such as GDP per capita (at least in 2008, before the financial crisis hit the country) and a high unemployment rate (a peak – 24% - was reached in 2012[vi]), were structural prerequisites for nation-building (see Jovanović, 2014) and conceivably opened the way for a regime 'switch'.

Since its first tenure in 2012, Alexandar Vučić has yearned for the modernization of the country under the banner of containing nationalist penchants. The ideological re-composition that followed has blurred the boundaries between the different ideologies that have marked the historical course of the country since the break-up of Yugoslavia, which predominantly

materialized through a form of competitive authoritarianism (Tournois, 2021). One of its most salient aspects is the political reorganization of the urban space, with the BW being at the forefront of this strategy.

The built fabric of the BW and its associated state and media narratives carry the labels of a 'global-cosmopolitan' discursive prose in which Serbian political establishment has inscribed its political agenda. In short, the global contains the national through BW. This embodies a shift from the territorial nationalism typical of the Milošević era (Kostovicova, 2004), to becoming a major political instrument that aims to create a 'new' (national) imaginary and project a modern and 'open to the world' image, but without the long-time ingrained cultural enmities that lie in the mythical Serbian stories or songs (Hudson, 2003).

Retrospectively, even before the first stone was laid, the visit and the encouraging speech given by former New York mayor Rudolf Giuliani, could be hailed as a landmark in the development of BW and, by extension, the country. To avoid any accusation of bribery or abuse of public money that would have been used by the local opposition to the government, he first declared: "I came to Belgrade privately and we never talked about getting paid". He also pointed out that he was honored to be able to help the Serbian Progressive Party project 'Belgrade Waterfront' and added that the latter is "extraordinary," that it can change the capital and Serbia, and that it will attract investments (RTS, 2012). He could finally be considered as the instigator of the 'new horizon' whose progress will mark the different mandates of Aleksandar Vučić under the "Only a great leader has big dreams and dreams of big changes" seminal statement (TV Studio B, 2020).

The BW then became the recipient of these dreams. Following a long tradition of political leaders who ruled the country, Alexandar Vučić also aimed to create a historical figure in the development of contemporary Serbia. This contends that, unlike illustrious characters such as Charles the Great, whose renaissance has a divine origin, his mission is more pragmatic and consists of converting skeptics, 'ancients', etc. to the new politico-economic orientation of the Serbian government.

As Schnepel (2005) put it, "a dream is to be made true in waking, it will there initiate, support and legitimize actions directed towards achieving this goal' (p. 209). Since 2012, state narratives have been designed to bring the vision of the dream into the life of every Serb by walking in the alleys of Belgrade Waterfront, sitting in cafes with Ana Brnabić, Serbia's first

LGBT prime minister and ruling elite's incarnation of country's modernization politics, and from the terrasse of the Belgrade Tower contemplating the city and the construction of a new history in the manner of a Napoleon addressing his soldiers facing the pyramids of Egypt.

Another aspect of state narratives refers to the return of Serbia to the world concert of nations. During his presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Marshall Tito was primarily portrayed as a 'Citizen of the World' instead of a 'regional leader', which had an indirect influence on both the self-understanding and self-respect and pride of the Yugoslavs (Tournois & Đerić 2021). Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed, Serbian citizens fell again in the negative imagination associated with the Balkans: "one of the West's most significant others" and, along with South American drug cartels and the predatorial Japanese economy, the region was represented as the 'civilizational antitype' (Hammond, 2005, p. 135).

Figure 1. The first maquette of BW exposed to the public (2015). Photo taken by the author.

In a nutshell, the BW project (Figure 1) was assigned the role of "a new kind of spatial imagination capable of confronting the past in a new way and reading its less tangible secrets off the template of its spatial structures - body, cosmos, city, as all those marked the more intangible organization of cultural and libidinal economies and linguistic forms" (Jameson, 1991, p. 364-365) in order to bear the burden of post-war grievances and reduce internal resistance to economic and social progress.

The onset of Belgrade Waterfront

The rather unexpected support received by the ruling party likewise brought to the fore the legitimization issue that appears to be one of the recurring issues political elites face when it comes to transforming the country. Since the drastic regime change that followed the fall of Slobodan Milošević, Serbian heads of state have suffered more or less continuously from the 'weak' political support of voters. For instance, in the presidential elections held on April 2nd, 2017, less than one-third (29.93%) of the electorate supported Aleksandar Vučić, which represents 13.46 percent fewer votes (2,012,788 vs. 2,326,063) than a coalition around the ruling party in the parliamentary elections held in April 2016. While he publicly claimed it as a "victory pure as a tear", various opposition media qualified it as a Pyrrhic Victory (Nikolić, 2017). In comparison, in the 2017 presidential elections in France, Emmanuel Macron was supported by 43.61% of registered voters[vii]. Consequently, legitimacy mostly comes from the outside and less from the ballot box. In 2001, the newly elected Zoran Đinđić received support from world figures, such as George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Jacques Chirac. 16 years later, Aleksandar Vučić was congratulated by Russian President Vladimir Putin and the President of Hungary, János Áder speaking of a 'convincing victory' and a 'decision made by a large majority' (Nikolić, 2017).

This situation has raised an important matter about the capacity of Serbia's ruling elite to enact its vision of the 'upcoming' Serbian identity which would take the appearance of a reinterpretation of the original identity containing the representation and validation of subjects, state and individual actors within global narratives binding neoliberalism and multiculturalism (Andolina et al., 2005). However, unlike what happened during Yugoslav socialism, when the political elite entered in a constant process of interpreting-reinterpreting all formal aspects of a certain social reality, so as to justify the relevance of the Yugoslavian market-socialist model

compared to present (or conceivable) alternative institutional forms (Ivković et al., 2019), in contemporary Serbia, the politics conducted since 2012 aim to deal with the remains of Yugoslav market socialism, contrast to the economic *laisser faire* and tentative Europeanization of the 2000s, economic catch-up and nationalism containment while enforcing an "active transformative politics of framing" (see Beck, 2007, p. 691) or, more precisely, re-framing Serbian identity within a global imaginary by focusing on boundary crossing.

So as to break the 'glass ceiling of transformation', discursive practices then entered into a process of legitimation by action, the new horizon being the fulfillment of a dream. The latter objective was then merged in the BW ideology in order to reduce the tensions between the country's leadership and its citizens, particularly Belgradians, by justifying efforts to modernize the course of the country, discard and overpower competing claims, and ultimately legitimize the already existing balance of power (see Schnepel 2005). On March 17, 2015, Aleksandar Vučić then Prime Minister promised on the main Serbian public service channel (RTS), that: "In, say, four years, the last house from the model will be built. You will see serious results by the end of the year. You will see the 200-meter promenade and you will see the first two towers we are talking about, I think, in a year." (Manojlović, 2015).

On September 27, 2015, at 17.13, the first stone of what will soon be named "an unlikely place for Gulf petrodollars to settle" (Wright, 2015), the BW project, was officially laid by Muhamed Alabar, director of the emirate private investment and real estate company *Eagle Hills*, and Aleksandar Vučić, then Prime Minister of Serbia. The event was followed minute by minute in the media in the manner of an opening ceremony for the Olympic Games, as reported in government media.

Few minutes earlier, at 16.31, Aleksandar Vučić, declared: "It is at this place that we are writing new pages of the history of our country and city". He emphasized that a small number of people believed in that project, but that it is becoming a reality today. He called on everyone who doubts this project to put their doubts aside because it is becoming a reality today. "I respect everyone who is against Belgrade Waterfront," said Vučić, and he emphasized that "that piece of land" has never interested anyone for 70 years and from whom everyone looked away. He added: "Our job is to change that, to make Belgrade and Serbia better, and not to enrich the government." (Mondo 2015).

Transparency rhetoric progressively became an integral part of the nation-building performances of the ruling elite. Although the BW is not explicitly represented as a hegemonic project of a country's neoliberal social transformation, in the face of enduring corruption in the public sector and through its projected job creation[viii], it serves as a means of promoting neoliberal policies as a remedy to the immoral reallocation of societal resources (Mikuš, 2016). However, because it includes neither participation nor empowerment of the public and other non-state actors, propagating a discourse of justification that legitimizes undermining the conditions of democratic practice for the sake of economic efficiency (Matković & Ivković, 2018) may have framed the emergence of anti-neoliberal movements and, primarily, public mistrust.

The enemy within: ancients vs. moderns and the 'new Others'

However, after nearly three years in power (2012-2015), this period was marked by little progress on various significant macroeconomic issues, such as higher salaries and pensions, opening of chapters as part of the EU accession process, (BW) towers and apartments, new projects, healthier Serbia, better life and dynamic growth. While Aleksandar Vučić portrayed himself as a 'reformer', he added that reforms have started in difficult times: "We are all skeptical, we are waiting for someone else to solve everything. We have accepted hard work; the worst floods in history have hit us, but we have also embarked on harsh economic reforms. We have started to change our attitude towards Serbia everywhere in the world," Vučić said (RTS, 2015). In a certain way, this declaration has posed the first milestones of the reforming rhetoric that the government will maintain thereafter.

In parallel, criticisms of the Serbian opposition vis-à-vis government initiatives have since become a form of ritual or oratorical contest. Moreover, the early construction phase of the BW provided substantial legal and financial resources to opposition parties to confront the regime in power, with their definitive goal being regime change. Representatives of the opposition parties in Belgrade pointed out in a debate on Istinomer entitled 'let us not lie, held in the Belgrade Youth Center, that the project 'Belgrade Waterfront' will be subject to revision after they come to power: "Someone will end up in prison for 'Belgrade Waterfront', and the Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka*) will, after coming to power, repeal the *lex specialis* about that project. We will not terminate the contract because Serbia would probably have to pay huge penalties. We advocate for the institutions to function, and the Attorney General's Office and the Public

Prosecutor can declare this state project null and void. I can say that we will remove the illegal building 'Savanova, said Balša Božović, President of the City Board of the Democratic Party (Istinomer, 2015).

Although the Serbian opposition effectively contributed to make BW an internationally controversial matter, the latter has served as an outlet for an opposition in search of a 'second youth' after the failures years of power following the departure of Slobodan Milošević. Indeed, the mediatized grievances that may have aroused popular distrust tacitly ignored the opposition's structural failings rooted in the post-October 5th period of democratic change. The latter is mostly viewed by the public as "a great missed opportunity for the true transformation of Serbia. The main reason is the fact that there was no lustration, and that the previous political establishment did not go through that process" (Petrović 2015).

One of the unplanned outcomes is that it further persuaded the Serbian ruling elite that BW, like the Rogun Dam in Tadjikistan, can be presented as a symbol of self-determination and achievement (Menga, 2015), a symbol that has the power to bond Serbian citizens around a (new) national ideal beyond ethnic cleavages and in opposition to a shared adversary that are 'all those against the modernization of Serbia'. Serbian opposition and all those voicing against the project thus became the 'enemy within'.' This postulate will serve as a basis for the construction of the BW ideology and its two pillars, which are ethnic underbidding and alterity, that is, demonizing (internal challengers), strategy. First, the BW does not aim to defend block interests (Coakley, 2008, p. 769) but to reposition (not to say 're-brand') a 'new' party[ix] on the political scene along a neoliberal and protector-of-the-interests-of-the-nation pragmatic position to gain voters' support. Here, the adopted stance, ideologically not extreme, aims to distance the ruling party from its rivals, particularly those that have been in power since the 5th October Revolution as well as from the far-right ones[x]. Secondly, the corollary of the underbidding strategy relates to 'destabilizing' or 'demonizing' the internal challengers (Gagnon, 2013) in order to manipulate voters' preferences. It rehabilitated the old debate between 'ancients and moderns' and took up this old opposition by radicalizing it, affirming two conceptions of the construction of identity. Some, turned towards the past, believe that it is appropriate to imitate their predecessors, because they have reached the perfection of their art. Others, fixed on the present, think that it is necessary, on the contrary, to innovate to find solutions that correspond to the spirit of the time. Between the two camps, the conciliators try to harmonize the positions, and if they take into

account previous contributions, they must also be adapted to new situations, used as a springboard that allows progress to be made (Fumaroli, 2001).

Serbian government then regularly heightened its own self-assessment by differentiating itself with the constructed 'Others' over 'hostile stereotypes, distortions, and caricature' (Gruen, 2010). The Prime Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, stated in the TV show *Upitnik* that he does not see the elements of the coup that the media have speculated about in recent days, but that there is a constant intention to collapse the Government of Serbia: "These are the ones who don't want change, different political factors", he added (RTS, 2015). The 'political factors' in question are represented by the Serbian opposition parties.

However, the vilification, even demonization, of the project detractors to affirm the superiority of the policies conducted by the government in place may not necessarily generate public support. Consequently, at least in the short run, such politics may reinforce the advantages and capabilities of Serbia's political establishment at the expense of opposition forces. 2017 onwards, BW branding efforts have grown in power to build and foster the 'new' national identity that diverges from a previous form of an imagined Serbian community by lessening the conflict between inward- and outward-directed elements of nation branding (see Ståhlberg & Bolin, 2016).

Branding BW as a transformative process

Besides RTS, Blic and other state-supporting medias working together, Brash, the British 'brand, communications and experience agency', was mandated to increase the visibility of BW and by 'channeling official statements' that reflect the government's vision for the city of Belgrade and, by extension, Serbia.

> *"We positioned Belgrade Waterfront as the smart city for the future, taking urban renewal to new heights. A lively mixed-use quarter, right to the water, will bring pride and passion to the city's new heart.*
>
> *Our brand idea, 'Where prosperity flows', captures its aspirations as a tourist attraction, commercial hub and lifestyle destination. The creative expression, 'Uniquely Belgrade', plays on the city's special history, art, culture, food, and attitudes toward fashion and fun of those who live in this vibrant city.*

From the iconic Kula Tower and the Sava Promenade to the Belgrade Boulevard (the backbone of the district), Belgrade Park and the Mall, the Historic Waterfront Plaza, Round-house Arts Venue and Commercial Districts–all these places work seamlessly together to add up to the brand promise and deliver an experience that celebrates history, tradition, and pride."

(Source : https://brash.agency/projects/belgrade-waterfront/)

A cultural (re)construction of the Serbian nation?

I start from the premise that BW's uniqueness and symbol of success encapsulates in the above statement that invites (citizens, tourists, etc.) to 're-discover the national essence' of the country. However, uniqueness is culturally constructed; in other words, it produces a new reality, given that these places did not exist before, or did not exist as such. The branding of BWs iconic features that aim to 'celebrate history, tradition and pride' through a back-and-forth process actually "re-manufactures the authenticity of the nation and grants legitimacy to those who hold the power to articulate its realness" (Kaneva, 2018, p. 639-640).

As portrayed in various media campaigns (whether online or using public billboards), the BW operates to convert individuals into consumers. The hectic increase and even duplication of cultural events, award-winning spaces, and shopping malls, intend to approximate the domains of affect and built assemblage, and to create emotional atmospheres encouraging new forms of civic and cultural life to arouse (Miller, 2013). Ultimately, the highly mediatized New Year's celebration made the 'new' city center representative of "globalized forms of cultural production and consumption" (Gotham, 2005, p. 242).

Media representations of BW's key aspects are about 'nationalizing the global' (Fernandes, 2000). Indeed, the only tradition the project refers to is a foreign one: the Chinese Lantern Festival which brings 'the spirit of tradition and symbolism of ancient China'[xi]. On the one hand, such festivals, in addition to cultural events and New Year's Eve celebrations, may certainly benefit Belgrade economically by widening extra-local exposure[xii] (see Schuster, 2001). On the other hand, one can wonder whether cultural signs, symbols, and traditions imported from abroad contribute to the creation and deployment of a new (nationalist) imaginary. In short, could a political and cultural community be formed around such unrequited (cultural) material (see Tallentire, 2001)? This question remains open, but what can be taken for granted is that BW personifies Serbia's shift from ethnic pointers that were once the more powerful foundations of identity (Nagel, 1997) to 'global culture'[xiii] markers.
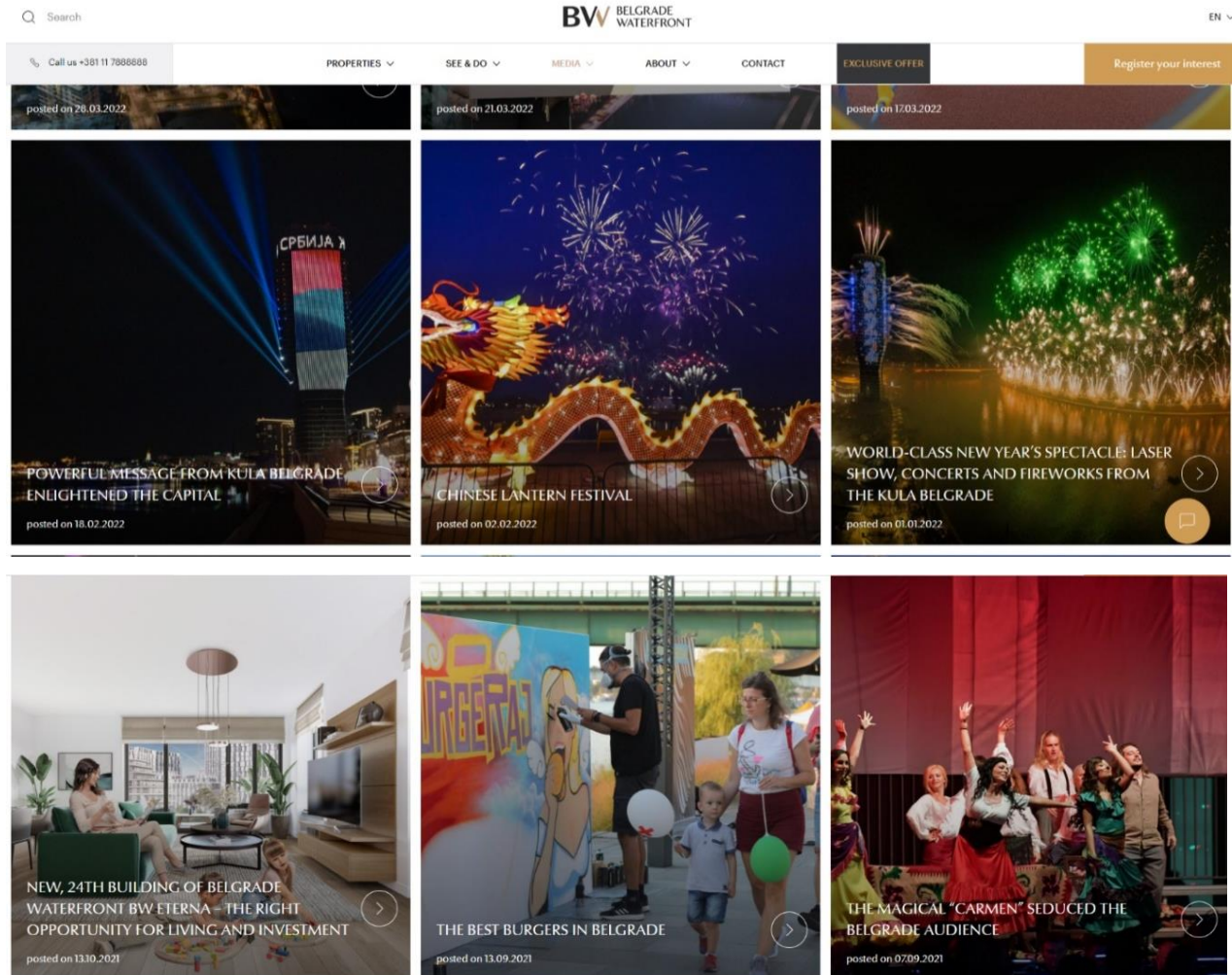
Figure 2. Screenshot of BW-media webpage[xiv].

This suggests that from now onward, this space represents the template from which the traits of the new reality for Serbia are to be read. Interestingly, the location where the Belgrade Waterfront project is built, the Savamala district, was depicted as a 'real mockery of the city, overgrown with bushes, damaged by the cemetery of ships, and neglected huts'[xv]. This very selective reading masks a richer reality and history, which, to some extent, epitomizes the modernization of Belgrade that began after the restoration of principality during the first quarter of the 19th century. Later on, diverse cultural actors fostered freedom of expression in this genuine area by deploying 'narrative myths' in order to safeguard its historical and cultural legacy (Milovanović & Vasislki, 2021). State officials have not considered it as a 'place of memory' and no attempts were made 'to sacralize' it although the location's significancy was

stricto sensu re-framed into a symbolic setting which to some extent proceeds from the nation building process using 'invented traditions' as articulated in their pioneering study by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983/2012) and implemented in diverse political and cultural settings (e.g., Ma, 1998; Kong, 1999; Moreno et al., 1998).

'Relations of difference' are grounded in a socio-economic and political divide
One of the fundamental theoretical underpinnings of the politics of identity is that the latter [identity] "is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative" (Hall, 1991, p. 21), therefore assuming relations of difference. One would probably not expect that discursive and branding practices spinning around the need to renew the Serbian nation have concealed its divisive nature and have 'internalized' the necessary 'Other'.
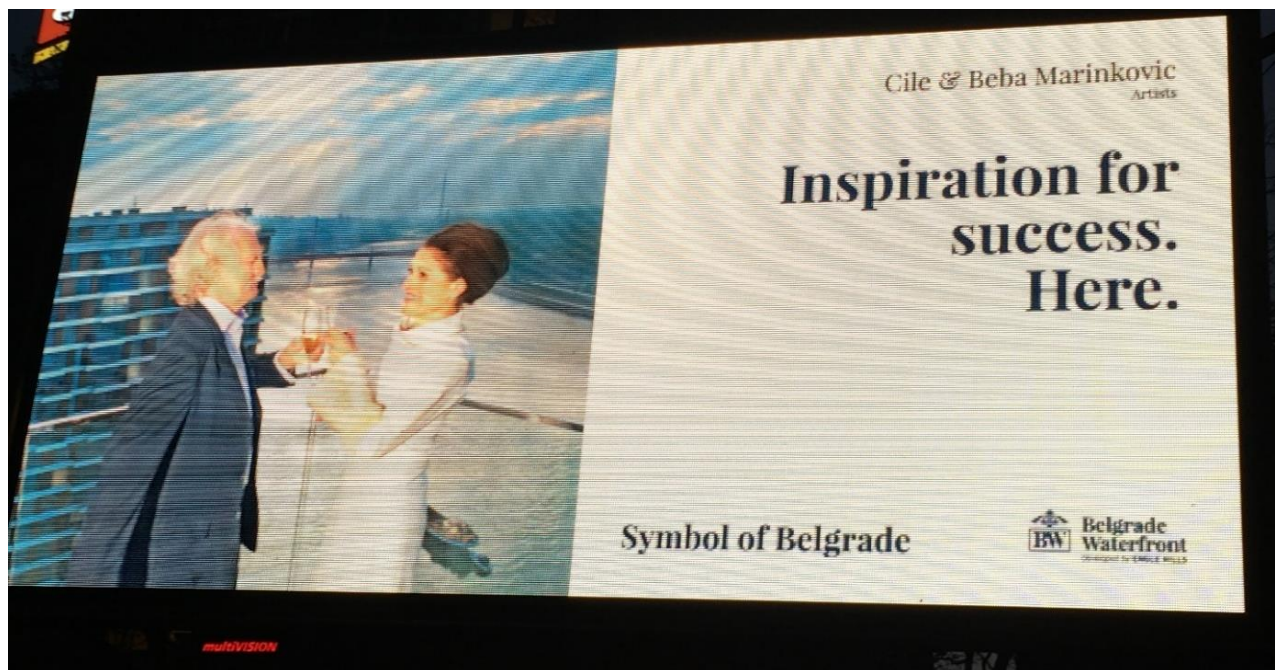

Figure 3. BW advertisement on a public billboard present around the BW complex. Photo taken by the author.

Chosen symbols of BW (Figure 3), Cile and his wife Beba Marinković presumably drank a glass of champagne on one of the smaller tower terrasses, portraying an abstruse picture of success. In fact, the difference implicitly conveyed does not refer to an ethnically, but a socio-economically and politically constructed 'Other'. Cile Marinković is a famous Serbian painter

who received in 2010 the National Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Culture of the Republic of Serbia. In 2017, he was one of the 600 eminent personalities that initialed the proclamation "For a better Serbia" in which, as they say, with their name, knowledge, and achievements, they support the candidacy of the leader of the progressives, Aleksandar Vučić. The text of the proclamation, among other things, states that 'everyone is ready to fight with Vučić for a better Serbia, as he is the guarantor of a decent and orderly country' (Srbin.Info, 2017).

Although coherent with state narratives, BW does not fit the statement that nationalist projects are built on the homogenizing developments that form 'national sameness' but is inherently grounded in the processes of individualization that organize subnational differences (e.g., Medina, 1997). At this point, 'national sameness' is not represented in terms of race and/or ethnicity, but in terms of, said in a trivial way, the 'poor' vs. the 'rich' and supporters vs. opponents to the nation-building project of the ruling elite.

From the preceding analysis, we can conclude that BW is, in essence, selective and exclusive. Given the local living standards, BW talks to the privileged, those that would finally benefit from the 'new' nation building project. It is interesting to note that they do not predominantly line Serbia. So 'who are the buyers?' "These are our people, the diaspora and we have a number of foreign customers. We have a lot of buyers from the EU, we have a lot of buyers from China, we also have buyers from the Middle East", said Nikola Nedeljković, director of BW. Nebojša Nešovanović from the International Real Estate Consulting House CBRE added that: "We need to stop looking at our real estate market as a standard residential real estate market anywhere in the West. The real estate market is a capital market. We can compare our residential real estate market with stock exchanges in New York or somewhere in the West. The profits are quite satisfactory, and all investors are willing to enter new investments." (B92, 2021). Contrary to what happened since the late 1980s, economic liberalization ultimately expressed in BW did not lead to a (re-)affirmation of certain ethnic identities and loyalties (Volcic, 2007), but brought back ancient 'abstract-universal designations' such as 'working man', 'poor', 'poor" rich', 'rich' and, in the end, transition winners and losers.

As the project finally has come to end, Aleksandar Vučić declared, after quoting the famous French writer Victor Hugo, that:

"Dreams create the future! Dream big dreams! Serbia can progress only with great work and learning. I am convinced that if we work hard and learn, we can progress in the future and that Serbia can be a leader in the region in terms of economy and progress." (Telegraf, 2021).

This statement somewhat concludes the nation building process that has started in 2012 and finally illustrates that the 'national' faded into the 'cosmopolitan' here understood as a "an intrinsically classed phenomenon, as it is bound up with notions of knowledge, cultural capital and education: being worldly, being able to navigate between and within different cultures, requires confidence, skill and money" (Binnie et al., 2006, p. 8).

Conclusions

Over the past twenty years, academic debates about how nation building processes have been challenged by globalization in many post-communist countries (e.g., Kostovicova & Bojičić-Dželilović, 2006) and may have appeared as competing priorities for political elites (e.g., Janmaat, 2008; Ren, 2008) have received growing, but scant attention.

This paper arises in this discussion by delving into the ways in which shifting narratives of authenticity and success within transformative political agendas (Andolina et al., 2005) are assembled through the BW project. Renewed nation building attempts have taken place in the context of a political strategy of 'de-ethnicizing the Serbian nation' and the economic liberalization policies introduced gradually since 2012 in Serbia, while accounting for post-conflict trauma, grievances, and international sanctions. State narratives, media coverage, and branded icons of the BW have increasingly contributed to the creation of an authoritarian and overtly open-to-the-world political culture, one that has emancipated from the nationalist rhetoric and supporting symbols of the 1990s by switching to the global to contain the national.

The empirical material we analyzed revealed that, while political elites have been inspired by folk texts that use a variety of old-fashioned clichés and bring with them 'popular mythology' and 'collective beliefs' (see Čolović, 1990) in the 1990s, the branding of BW and associated arguments have provided a new manifesto for self-discovery and the construction of a national identity (Kaneva, 2021). What we discovered is that by bringing the global to Serbia, ruling elites' nation-building project would be free of ethnic dissensions and national disputes, firmly rooted in the belief that ethnicity and nationalism will be swiftly outdated by a 'global culture' (see Smith, 1990). From the perspective of autocratic rule that has dominated the various

mandates of Aleksandar Vučić, state and local actors' discursive practices that aim to represent the national essence at the same time ensure its realness (Kaneva, 2018). On December 28, 2021, the President of Serbia published a video showing the Belgrade Tower in the BW, where the final preparations for New Year's Eve were made. He posted a video on his Instagram profile under the name 'futureofserbiaav' (@buducnostsrbijeav), in which he had a message for the citizens of Serbia:

> "The only limit we have is our dreams! From the mockery of Belgrade [Savamala, the area in which the BW is located], we have made Serbia proud. We could do all that, only because we were united in the fight for a better and more beautiful Serbia. What you see is the last preparation for a spectacular New Year's Eve. Welcome to Belgrade, welcome to the world!" The president wrote in the description of the video on his Instagram account 'buducnostsrbijeav' (Tanjug, 2021 in Blic, 2021).

Nonetheless, given the controversies the project has generated, 'we were united' looks more like a forced march towards urging the Serbs to share the same (national) 'map of meaning' and to interpret the world through the lenses of the ruling elite/BW. It somewhat refutes the self-determination viewpoint although, at the same time, it displays competing meanings, partly because governments deploy frequently contradictory regimes of sovereignty, knowledge, and identity building (Gibson, 1998). Moreover, unlike the rock and roll phenomenon, all things being equal, the 'cultural apparatus' of BW does not provide its audience with sufficient empowerment practices, and the various performances held at BW may have little power to generate" 'affective alliances' (Grossberg, 1984).

The underlying narrative scheme also hides the divisive nature of the project and, therefore, contests the egalitarian conception of nations along a horizontal versus vertical axis (Smith, 2013). Metaphorically, BW may thus represent the transition from 1990s horizontal obsessive expansionism ("liberation of all Serbian lands") to XXI century's vertical deprivation of cities and their resources from citizens (see Pančić, 2018)[xvi]. The BW (ideology) has progressively 'carved in stone' the definitive rift between those negotiating modernity (the 'elite'[xvii]) and the detractors (democratic opposition and anyone not supporting or voting for the party in power), far away from any national consolidation in a country that has faced the consequences of ethnic divisions. This situation is reminiscent of the dynamic that forged the modern Belgrade between 1830 and the late 1860s when the ruling group's "negotiation of modernity" finally lead to frame "the city as a site of conflict between mutually defining forces"

([Jovanović, 2013, p. 32](#)). The installation of the monument of the Serbian medieval ruler Stefan Nemanja at the very entrance to the BW district adds to this debate as a possible final concession to far-right parties where Russian aesthetic canons dispute it with the desire to hang on Serbia's past, its national roots (not to say nationalist) roots to the globalist wagon[xviii]. This situation offers potential for further inquiry by examining, for instance, the sources of support/rejection of BW operating at the representational level and, broadly speaking, to what extent BW's branding campaign has created a 'simulation nation' ([Kaneva, 2018](#)).

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 26th Annual World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), May 4-7, 2022.

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Endnotes:

[i] Given the number of academic papers using the acronyms BW (Belgrade Waterfront) or BWP (Belgrade Waterfront project), we identify Belgrade Waterfront with its Serbian commonly used name '*Beograd na vodi*' (BNV) which literally means 'Belgrade on water'.

[ii] I used the terms 'Aleksandar Vučić', 'ruling party', 'political elite', 'ruling elite', 'government' and 'political establishment' indifferently.

[iii] The underlying assumption borrows from Giddens (2003) and other scholars for whom globalization is a commanding transformative force behind rapid and massive social, political, and economic shifts that have remodeled modern societies.

[iv] In June 2014, state and non-state officials from Serbia and the UAE revealed the master plan of the BNV project. (Accessed April 13, 2022. https://failedarchitecture.com/belgrade-waterfront/).

[v] By 'Serbia', I mean the historical reality resulting from its inclusion in the second Yugoslavia in 1945.

[vi] Accessed April 4, 2022. https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SRB/serbia/unemployment-rate

[vii] Accessed March 30, 2022. https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Presidentielles/elecresult__presidentielle-2017/(path)/presidentielle-2017/FE.html

[viii] Serbian government expected up to 20,000 workers to be employed in the construction of BNV according to various official sources (e.g., Sekularac 2015). This figure will subsequently be denied several times.

[ix] The Serbian Progressive Party or SNS (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*) rules the country since 2012. It was founded in 2008 following a scission from the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*).

[x] More precisely, SPP strategy can be characterized as 'lateral underbidding' meaning that the "party widens its appeal beyond the ethnic group and shifts towards more moderate policy positions on the ethnic dimension" (Zuber 2013).

[xi] https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/chinese-lantern-festival-2/

[xii] To what extent it would increase the prestige of local goods and cultural institutions remains to be validated.

[xiii] This argument derives from the idea developed by Smith (1990) that the nation is somewhat outmoded by a 'post-industrial global culture', resulting from "a process of depoliticization, a 'withering away' of nationalism" (172). The author also stressed the limits of this approach.

[xiv] https://www.belgradewaterfront.com/en/bw-media/

[xv] Accessed March 4, 2022. https://mondo.rs/Info/Drustvo/a833830/Polaganje-kamena-temeljca-za-dve-kule-Beograda-na-vodi.html

[xvi] I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

[xvii] This refers to the notion of 'Serbian elite' or '*Srpska elita*' in line with the works of Olivera Milosavljević (e.g., Milosavljević 2002).

[xviii] I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.