

INCLUSION OR ILLUSION? RETHINKING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING COMPLEX URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE SYSTEMS IN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the role and position of public participation in the planning and implementation processes of large infrastructure systems, such as metro projects. Opening the process to the public only during the early hearing and public hearing stages of plan development—after key decisions have already been made, such as feasibility studies, conceptual designs, and financing sources—reduces public participation to a mere formality, failing to achieve its true purpose. At those planning stages, solutions are highly developed, and changes resulting from adopting citizen comments are nearly impossible to implement. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that planning is only one of the instruments of urban development management (and one of the final steps in the decision-making process) and that public participation must be extended to other processes, decisions, and documents that define development, particularly for complex infrastructure systems such as metro projects, which are multidimensional in technical-technological, spatial-functional-ecological, and legal-financial terms. Through a review of the relevant legal and planning regulations, and an analysis of their implementation in the case of the Belgrade Metro, the paper explores critical decision-making points and the role of the public in these processes. Considering the exponential decline in public interest in participation in the ongoing Belgrade Metro project, the research aims to understand the challenges of public involvement in large linear infrastructure projects and propose approaches to improve current participation trends.

KEYWORDS _ *Pseudo-participation, decision making, Belgrade metro project*

INTRODUCTION

In a time of growing efforts of academic community and civic society organizations to raise awareness about the importance of participation in urban planning process in Belgrade, in practice, the urban planning processes often reflect only an illusion of participation. The topic of civic participation in Serbia has gained increasing prominence over the past five years, as evident from the organization of numerous petitions, protests, discussions, and published materials. Civic associations, non-governmental organizations and academic community emphasize that the strategic commitments to involving citizens in decision-making, as outlined in the *National Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Republic of Serbia*, are not reflected in the legal framework of urban planning, much less in practice (Aksentijević, 2023). These organizations propose various tools and actions to enhance citizen participation in the planning process. The recommendations for improving the participation process primarily focus on increasing activities related to timely and adequate public information, improving the accessibility and readability of documents, finding more appropriate timings and venues for legally defined early public and public hearing activities (Slavković & Graovac, 2021), and promoting greater involvement through informal models of participation. However, pro forma civic participation is becoming increasingly evident during the final stages of drafting planning documents when planning solutions are already fully defined, leaving little room for corrections (Aksentijević, 2023). This issue is particularly apparent in the example of the complex urban infrastructure systems, such as metro systems, whose planning, construction, and maintenance demand a multidisciplinary approach and long-term strategic planning. These systems are often highly rigid and challenging to modify due to significant technical constraints, making adaptability a major obstacle in their development and operation. To demonstrate the insufficient level of public participation, annual reports on the degree of citizen involvement in urban planning processes have been published, showing that participation is at approximately one-third of its potential (Čukić et al., 2022; Stojić et al., 2023). These reports recommend, among other things, increasing public involvement during the initial stages of plan preparation, including the phase of adopting the decision to develop the plan and defining the concept of the planning solution. To empower employees in public institutions, civic associations without urban planning experts, and all stakeholders involved in participatory processes, professional guides and manuals are being published to help them monitor, evaluate, and influence the participation process (Milovanović Rodić, 2024; Milovanović Rodić et al., 2022; Slavković, 2020; Public Policy Secretariat of the Republic of Serbia, 2020; RERI, 2022; Stojanić, 2020; Slavković, 2022; Đokić, Graovac, Slavković, & Radovanović, 2023; Stajić, 2016). They also explain how to access information crucial for understanding planning solutions, the extent to which planning processes in Serbia are transparent (Slavković & Graovac, 2021), and how citizens can unite to achieve shared urban goals (Aksentijević et al., 2023). While these measures will undoubtedly contribute to greater transparency and enhance the quality of the planning process, there remains scepticism regarding urban plans that are developed simultaneously with project documentation. Moreover, the recent public policy documents suggest further restrictions on participation rights (Radovanović et al., 2022). It is suspected that key decisions are made before the planning document is drafted, during the preliminary feasibility studies and conceptual design stages. Consequently, citizens' objections may not be accepted, with many characterized as unfounded, referencing to the program tasks and input data provided by relevant public institutions, which have already been developed, and for the development of which funds have already been spent.

A clear example of these challenges can be seen in the planning and implementation of large-scale linear infrastructure projects, where limited public participation is particularly evident due to the parallel development of planning and project documentation, as demonstrated in the case of the Belgrade metro.

THE ISSUE OF LINEAR INFRASTRUCTURE MEGAPROJECTS

The *Planning and Construction Law* for linear infrastructure structures defines the possibility of parallel development of planning documents alongside the preparation of project documentation - the preliminary design that contains all the necessary technical information. Due to their importance, scope, and rigidity of technical solutions, many linear infrastructure projects need a Preliminary Feasibility Study, with or without parts of a General Project, prior to creating a conceptual design. These studies analyse alternative solutions based on defined input parameters, determine the final solution, and proceed with the conceptual design development. During the preparation of these documents, preliminary conditions are obtained from relevant utility and other institutions to identify significant constraints from the outset. These documents are not subject to mandatory public participation, nor is there an obligation to publish them on publicly accessible websites. Representatives of technical control bodies verify compliance with all legal and sub-legal acts, while input data and defined criteria are determined by the city and relevant public institutions without opportunities for public participation. With technical solutions for linear infrastructure megaprojects already clearly defined, the preparation of the planning document begins, leading to the adoption of a Decision on Plan Development to establish legal conditions for further elaboration of technical documentation. The plan uses technical solutions as input, which are aligned with all conditions obtained from relevant public institutions during the plan preparation process, converts them into a planning solution, and presents them to the public in the form of Early Public Review and Public Review documentation. Citizen comments suggesting significant changes to the proposed solutions require corrections to all the aforementioned documents, leading to new complex procedures, additional time loss, and additional financial costs, followed by adjustments to the planning solution and another public review. For the Belgrade metro project, this complexity is further compounded by the fact that the Preliminary Feasibility Study with the General Project, as well as the conceptual design for the first phase of the first metro line, are the subject of an international agreement between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of France. Additionally, these documents involve a grant from the French government and were prepared by a foreign company, making it challenging to go back to the beginning and revise the documents. Furthermore, based on these documents and the elaboration of the conceptual design, procedures for securing loans have been initiated, along with the signing of a series of other international agreements related to further technical elaboration, construction, and future management of the metro system.

CASE STUDY – PLAN FOR THE METRO SYSTEM IN BELGRADE

The General regulation plan for rail systems in Belgrade with elements of detailed elaboration for phase I of the first metro line (2021), defines at the strategic level the development of rail systems (railway, metro and tram) and sets the planning basis for their further implementation. At the detailed level, the development of Phase I of the first metro line from Makiš to Pančevački most is defined. The Plan is in accordance with the *Planning and Construction Law* (2023) and meets the formal participation requirements to comply with the principle that planning should be based on public participation. This included early public hearing, public presentation, and public hearing.

The early public hearing was conducted from February 3 to March 6, 2020, for one month, although the legal minimum is 15 days, due to the extensive documentation presented to the public, primarily concerning the historical development of the railway, metro, and tram systems in Belgrade through previous studies, analyses, and plans. The Plan elaboration was available in digital form on the City of Belgrade website, and in physical form at the City Administration offices from 9 AM to 6 PM on weekdays. A representative of the Plan's developer was required to assist interested parties with accessing the physical version of the Plan only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. During this phase of the Plan, 28 comments and suggestions were received, 17 from individuals, 8 from various citizen associations, and one each from the Novi Beograd Municipality and the Faculty of Civil Engineering

at the University of Belgrade. In general, none of the comments from citizens, associations, or the university and municipality were accepted, though a small number of comments were formally accepted, specifically those addressing alternative solutions and technical errors. However, the proposed rail system solutions remained unchanged in the proposed Plan for public review. Public participation in the public hearing process of the Plan began with the announcement of the public review from August 23 to September 24, 2021, also available digitally on the City of Belgrade website, in physical form at the City Administration. The Stari Grad Municipality organized a public presentation on September 15, where the Plan developer was to explain the Plan to the citizens, but no citizens attended. A public discussion was scheduled for October 12 and was broadcast live on television, but only one representative of the signatories of the comment could attend, not even all the submitters of the comments. During the public review process, comments were submitted by 105 participants, including 91 individual citizens and citizens' associations, and 14 public institutions. Again, the Faculty of Civil Engineering submitted its comments, as well as two political parties. The comments largely repeated those from the earlier public review phase, although the balance of accepted comments formally increased. A total of 7 comments were accepted, 57 were partially accepted, 26 were rejected, 14 were deemed unfounded, and 3 were partially accepted and partially rejected, while 11 were partially accepted and partially considered unfounded. All accepted comments related to the metro system essentially concerned extending the branch of the first metro line to Orlovača cemetery along the Ibarska Highway. Reviewing the balance of accepted comments, we can conclude that public participation in this project led to some strategic additions to the metro system. All comments that were rejected or considered unfounded referred to solutions defined by the *Smart Plan* from 2017, the *Strategy for the Development of Public Passenger Rail Transport in the City of Belgrade for the period up to 2033 (with a 2017 baseline)*, the *Previous feasibility study with the General Project for metro lines 1 and 2*, technical solutions from the *Conceptual project for Phase I of the first metro line*, as well as development plans from the Secretariat for Public Transport. These various studies, strategies, and project documentation were not adequately presented to the public at the time of development, as there is no legal obligation to do so, except for the strategy on public transport development, which primarily pertains to the development of the tram network.

If the level of participation in this case study were evaluated according to the evaluation model defined in the Milovanović Rodić (2024), the index would be 5.15 out of a maximum of 21 for formal participation, meaning that 25% of the legally provided opportunities were utilized. The entity responsible for drafting the planning document (the Secretariat for Urban Planning and Construction Affairs, as part of the city administration) and the planning institution (also a city-owned company) could have increased the scope of participation. They could have published documents that are part of the planning documentation on the city or planning institution's website in a way that made them more visible and accessible for review within an appropriate timeframe, allowing citizens time to understand and influence them. Presentations of the planning solution could have been conducted at various stages in a manner that was comprehensible and clear to the public; focus groups could have been formed to hear the needs and opinions of citizens as well as the professional public, and so on. However, the question arises: would an increased scope of participation have any meaning if the response to every comment refers to documentation that constitutes the program task for drafting the Plan, where all decisions have already been made?

CONCLUSION

The general impression of public participation in decision-making related to spatial and urban planning in Belgrade is that it is only an illusion. The more citizens, civic associations, and non-governmental organizations strive to increase the level of participation, the more city institutions responsible for implementing the planning process work to undermine the essence of participation. As planning documents are fundamentally legal in nature, they strictly comply with the legally

prescribed procedures and the minimum requirements for mandatory participation. However, new legal loopholes and excuses are constantly being found to make decisions without citizen involvement. Increasing the transparency of the planning process, expanding the scope of formal participation, encouraging even more citizens to take part in the planning process, and encouraging plan developers to use informal models of participation are not sufficient. Despite these efforts, the future of civic participation in urban planning in Serbia remains uncertain, raising the question of whether these initiatives will genuinely lead to greater public involvement in decision-making during the drafting of planning documents for large-scale linear infrastructure projects. It is necessary to ensure active citizen participation during the stages of idea development, long before the creation of planning documents. Participation must be increased for documents where it is already legally defined as mandatory, such as strategies. Furthermore, it should be extended to include technical documentation that precedes planning solutions, such as feasibility studies and conceptual designs.

In the Belgrade Metro project, we can see the need for public review of input data not only for the planning solution but also for the Smart Plan, which defines the transport needs of Belgrade and serves as input data for the Preliminary Feasibility Study. If the initial assumption is flawed, all subsequent elements, even if derived through logical, sequential, and transparent procedures, are also flawed. Since all studies are approved by the relevant public institutions, they are not revisited through the planning solution and are taken as a publicly reached consensus. Consequently, all public objections to them are deemed unfounded. Furthermore, given that the current practice of participation is reduced to mere formality, responses to citizen objections are tailored to improve statistics in reports by non-governmental organizations that evaluate participation. Thus, the number of accepted objections is artificially inflated by partially accepting minor and insignificant issues. This creates the appearance of public involvement in the decision-making process, while in reality, participation remains superficial and ineffective.

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