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THE URBAN PLANNING STRATEGY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOFIA

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ABSTRACT

Recalling the doctoral research undertaken by the author at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia, this article reproduces the argument for an urban planning strategy for the development of the Bulgarian capital. It concludes that with recent developments in the Balkans, Sofia fell short in meeting the challenges and the steps towards sustainability included in the Sofia Statement of 1998. Its ambition to become a focal point for New Europe in the region is fading away; the city risks retaining the lowest ranking as an EU national capital.

1. Introduction

On record, the former chief architect of Sofia Peter Dikov stated that “the greatest advantage of Sofia is its geopolitical location. Historically, Sofia has always been a regional centre of Southeast Europe. It is a known fact from Roman history that Emperor Constantine wanted to make Sofia the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire at one point. It is not a well-known fact that he was from the city of Nish [the third largest city in contemporary Serbia], but his favourite city which he developed was Sofia. ... After these [Soviet-era] barriers collapsed

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in 1990, Sofia gradually started to renew its role as a regional centre, which is more visible politically than economically” [1]. Dikov goes on to point out that the fact that Sofia is currently developing means that the interest of foreign investors remains strong, unlike other areas in Europe where it has collapsed. He suggests this might be because investors recognise Sofia’s important geopolitical position [1].

Sofia is the capital of a Balkan State and, on European Union (EU) accession, it became an EU capital. The current urban layout of the city and its architectural ensemble is the result of different planning periods [2: 173]. When first established, the city was in line with other Central European capital cities at the time; during the Socialist period, the city was similar to other capitals that had been subsumed into the USSR [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2]. However, unlike Prague – another former Soviet-influenced state capital, the quality of the urban environs deteriorated after 1989, as no urban planning regime was implemented. Attempts were made to stop the resulting uncontrolled urban sprawl. It took two decades from 1989 for the Masterplan of the City of Sofia and Sofia Municipality [3] and its amendments to be adopted. During this long period, no mechanism was in place to stop erratic construction and many mistakes were made. Agreement on Sofia’s Masterplan could effectively have taken place in 1999 but was delayed by a decade.

This article addresses two main themes: (i) local sustainability and (ii) the urban planning agenda. Its content is reproduced from the doctoral research undertaken at the University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy, Sofia [4: 159 – 165]. Other themes covered by this research ranged from a review of urban planning framework in Bulgaria [5] to attempting a phenomenological reading of Sofia [6 – 8].



Figure 1. Aerial view of downtown Sofia, 1926 (© Peyo Kolev, [9])



Figure 2. Aerial view of downtown Sofia, as at present (© Google Earth)

2. Towards local sustainability

The Brundtland report defines sustainable development as a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” [10: 41].

Sustainable development aims to attain balanced socio-economic development which respects the rights of future generations to enjoy the present environs. Such development has three dimensions: social cohesion, economic posterity and the quality of the environment. The features of a sustainable system are also three-fold, namely, balance, robustness and adaptability. Prevention of instability can be attained through self-regulation and sufficiency. Robustness and adaptability characterise the ability to resist and accept external environmental changes.

The conference Towards Local Sustainability in Central and Eastern Europe held in Sofia in 1998 [11] – the second in the series of four regional Pan-European conferences – was a landmark event. Attended by 280 representatives from local authorities, local government associations, national governments, and environmental experts from 70 cities and 30 countries [12], the conference adopted the Sofia Statement, which addressed some of the major characteristics of planning at the time although it “had no bearing on the topic of eco-cities in Central and Eastern Europe” [12: 13].

Keen on their respective country forming an integral part of the EU, local communities and municipalities and their associations in Central and Eastern Europe identified the following three challenges at the Towards Local Sustainability Conference in Sofia [11]:

1. Mutual obligations between the EU and their respective country can contribute significantly to the future development of the EU: “We have to strive for a recognition and respect by Western partners of the diversity that distinguishes the countries of ‘Central and Eastern Europe’” [11: 12].
2. Rapid transitions to democracy, market-based economies, and a new style of administration are a challenge and a risk. Continuous motivation and empowerment of locals to take initiatives and play an active role within this context are imperative.
3. Appealing yet unsustainable patterns pose a hazard. Severe challenges include poverty, unemployment, poor housing and working conditions, air pollution and noise, degradation of land and habitats, and inadequate water management: “Unequal access to resources and power during the phase of transition has increased disparities within our societies” [11: 13].

The Regional Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns held in Sofia identified the following ten steps towards sustainability [11: 13 – 14]:

1. meet EU environmental protection standards and adopt the Aalborg Charter, that is, the Charter of European Sustainable Cities and Towns Towards Sustainability [13];
2. bring emerging market economies in line with the principles of sustainability;
3. create sustainable infrastructures and services for the benefit of present and future generations;
4. strive to halt the emergence of urban sprawl and the increase of road traffic;
5. build up democratic societies to foster participation in public decision-making;
6. commitment to international partnership and co-operation between cities and regions;
7. apply the instruments for local sustainable development granted in terms of the Sustainable Cities Report, the Lisbon Action Plan (endorsed by the participants at the Second European Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns [14]), and the European Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide (a systematic advice on the stages in preparing local sustainability strategies are given in a manual prepared by Hewitt [15]);
8. educate the young generation to master the tasks ahead;
9. adopt EU environmental legislation and
10. recognise “that sustainable development is inseparable from the conservation of cultural heritage and its harmonious use for the attainment of a better quality of life and economic development” [11: 14].

The Aalborg Charter has three parts [13]:

- i. a consensus declaration with respect to European cities and towns towards sustainability,
- ii. a campaign for European sustainable cities and towns and
- iii. engagement in Local Agenda 21 Processes, namely, local action plans towards sustainability.

With respect to step 4, the Sofia Statement further states: “spatial planning, the creation of sustainable transport systems and inter-municipal co-operation will need to play a crucial role

in this respect” [11: 13]. The assertion included as step 10 – proposed by the Roundtable on Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development – could not be included in the Sofia Statement before its adoption. Thus, it was included as an editorial amendment and proposed to be regarded as an informal amendment to Section III of the Sofia Statement [11: 14].

The last three sections of the declaration of the Regional Conference on Sustainable Cities and Towns held in Sofia [11] were messages to (a) national parliaments and governments in Central and Eastern Europe, (b) the “West”, and (c) the EU, respectively. The most significant was the call to national parliaments and governments in Central and Eastern Europe to “ensure a system of governance that guarantees local self-government and allocates powers and resources according to the principle of subsidiarity. Cities can make a crucial contribution to the sustainable development of democracy, society and economy. ... [And] publicise the rights of citizens according to the Aarhus Convention” [11: 14].

With respect to the “West”, the Regional Conference univocally stated that “Western support is most welcome and effective when there is a mutual exchange rather than a mere West-East transfer. We need to use the experiences of the West as a source of insight to set and achieve our own objectives and to develop capacity for self-management. Otherwise the mere call for compliance [with EU Legislation] might not lead to effective actions” [11: 14]. Since this regional conference, the rights of the public in terms of the Aarhus Convention [16] were publicised but require to be implemented in the spirit of the same convention.

3. Implementing the urban planning agenda

The statement by Dikov which opens this article was reproduced in an exclusive interview published in November 2009 in *Novinite*, the Sofia News Agency, two decades after Todor Zhivkov was forced to resign as leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party. This interview portrays the vision of the city’s principal public architect, whereby Sofia was perceived not just at the crossroads of European but also of global routes. Reference to this statement is illustrative of the platonic vision of Sofia as one would like it to be. It over-estimates Sofia’s role as a centre of southeast Europe. In an era of global communication technologies, the role of a crossroads must be reassessed. These days, and certainly in the future, the more important factor is the links with European networks. In the past, Bulgaria formed part of the Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Russian empires but now it is closer, politically speaking, to Europe than it is to the countries on its periphery.

The period since Liberation from Ottoman occupation in 1879 until 1944 [Fig. 3 and Fig. 4] was the golden age of the city. In 1990 the city commenced to renew its role as a political and economic regional centre of southeast Europe. Sofia’s present conceptual urban layout is rooted and controlled by the building of the railway from Nish to Istanbul in the 1880s [Fig. 5]. This railway line runs from the west to the east of the city, thus giving rise to its northern and southern zones. Industry developed in the north, while residential areas were located in the south, which offered higher-quality environs.

Four main strategic planning documents, all grounded in the principles of polycentricity and sustainability, affected the development of the urban planning strategy for Sofia City Region:

- the National Regional Development Strategy for the Republic of Bulgaria [17],
- the Regional Development Plan for the Southwest Planning Region [18],
- Sofia City Strategy [19] and
- the Masterplan of the City of Sofia and Sofia Municipality [3].

All incorporated the feedback of stakeholders through a process of thorough consultation and participation – including by the general public – and thus they represent the collective effort of today’s society to drive the city and the city municipality into the future.



Figure 3. Sofia Town Hall, 1890s; now the National Art Gallery (© Peyo Kolev, [20])



Figure 4. National Art Gallery, as at present



Figure 5. Expansion of Sofia since its foundation as the national capital (based on [21: 85])

4. Conclusions

Sofia fell short of meeting the challenges included in the Sofia Statement. The ten steps towards sustainability contained in this document could have formed the basis of the political agenda which addressed, in a sustainable implementable manner, the past and present architectural and urban design of Sofia and Sofia municipality for present and future generations. The changes post-1989 were not read as a process of democratisation but as laissez-faire capitalism and led to the consequent degradation of the urban and rural landscapes. There was no effective mechanism, and very little enforcement, to halt unregulated constructions. It was a period in which many blunders were made in the urban planning of the city. A masterplan of the city of Sofia and Sofia Municipality could have been adopted in 1999 but was delayed by a decade. This meant that, following various political and economic changes, Sofia missed the chance for properly regulated urban development while other cities, such as Prague, moved ahead. With developments in the Balkans such as the new airport in Athens and other major developments in Nish, Sofia's ambition to become a focal point for New Europe in the Balkans is fading away. The city missed its chance and, if professional master-planning is not rigorously implemented, Sofia is likely to retain the lowest ranking as an EU national capital.

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ГРАДОУСТРОЙСТВЕНА СТРАТЕГИЯ ЗА РАЗВИТИЕ НА СОФИЯ

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Ключови думи: София, Столична община, градоустройство, устойчивост, градоустройствена политика, България, Европейски съюз

РЕЗЮМЕ

Припомняйки докторската дисертация на автора в Университета по архитектура, строителство и геодезия – София, настоящата статия възпроизвежда аргумента за градоустройствена стратегия за развитие на българската столица. В нея се заключава, че с последните събития на Балканите София не е успяла да отговори на предизвикателствата и стъпките към устойчивост, включени в Декларацията за София от 1998 г. Нейната амбиция да се превърне във фокусна точка за Нова Европа в региона изbledнява; градът рискува да запази най-ниското си място като национална столица на ЕС.

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