Original scientific article

UDC: 796.61(497.11)

711.553:796.61(497.11)

ID: 212275980

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WHEN CITIZENS BECOME ACTIVISTS – NEGOTIATING URBAN SPACE IN BELGRADE*

Abstract: Looking at the emergence of urban movements in Belgrade, this paper examines bike activists and their struggle for urban space. More specifically, it analyzes how the bike activists perceive themselves and their activism. In this regard, we argue that the notion of *građanin* serves as a decisive marker of the activists' urban identity and their urban contestation. Stressing that they are citizens who are committed to making Belgrade a nicer and more livable city, the activists play down the political dimension of their engagement while successfully positioning them in opposition to politicians, authorities and political activists. Furthermore, the activists' spatial strategies reflect the specific context in which the bike activism is taking place. With their 'do-it-yourself-actions' and their emphasis on fun elements, the peaceful character of their activities and the simultaneous avoidance of political messages, the activists aim to distance themselves from mainstream politics while seeking to promote public support for their cause. Consequently, the activists' engagement for cycling in the city discloses a new field of agency by offering them an alternative way to articulate their critique towards politicians and authorities.

Keywords: space

Non MeSH: Belgrade, bike, urban movement, citizen

On 16 June 2013 more than 400 cyclists gathered on the grassland of Ušće to take part in the Orange Bike Ride¹ which was organized as one of the main events

* The collection of data on which the paper is based was supported by research grants of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (Marietta-Blau Stipendium) and the University of Vienna.

¹ The reference to the color orange during the bike event was chosen due to the financial support that was given to the festival by the Netherlands Embassy in Serbia and the initiator's origin from that very country.

during Belgrade's first bike festival called 'Beograd Velograd'². Initiated by a Dutch who had moved to Belgrade and started offering bike tours through the capital, 'Beograd Velograd' aimed at increasing public awareness towards the bike as a means of urban lifestyle and thus promoting cycling in the city. In order to attract people's attention and show cyclists' presence in traffic, the route of the Orange Bike Ride was planned to start from *Ušće*, an urban area that is located in New Belgrade on the mouth of the river Sava into the Danube. Passing over Branko's Bridge, one of the main bridges connecting New Belgrade with the city center, the bike tour should lead the cyclists not only geographically but also symbolically into the heart of the city where it would find its end in front of *Skupština*, the House of the National Assembly of Serbia. At this time, the festival and the Orange Bike Ride marked the climax in the formation of a bike activist scene in Belgrade. Although Serbia's capital has witnessed the emergence of various urban activist groups that address issues connected to the life in the city within the last years, the number of people who engage themselves either individually or as members or sympathizers of bike activist groups³ has by far grown the fastest. Furthermore, in their aim to promote cycling as an acknowledged means of transport, the activists use a variety of actions, such as the organization of public bike events, the painting of bike lanes or founding community hubs.

Thus, regarding the variety of Belgrade's bike activist scene, the paper explores its actors, their aims and the way they perceive themselves and their activism. In this regard we argue that the notion of *građanin* ('citizens' or 'city dwellers') serves as a decisive marker of the activists' urban identity and their urban contestation. Conceiving themselves as citizens who are committed for their city, the activists play down the political dimension of their activism. Moreover, they use the term *građanin* to emphasize their opposition to Belgrade's politicians and authorities, which they accuse of being corrupt, inactive and conservative about urban development. Consequently, the bike activists also resist comparisons with other forms of political activism, such as LGBT activism, or the NGO sector to emphasize the non-political dimension of their engagement. Since space plays a central role in the activists' struggle – both as the ground where the dangers of cycling are experienced and ideas for the development of the city are articulated as well as the field also where the activists' activities are located. Thus, the paper also investigates the activists' spatial strategies. Following the argument of the paper, it is demonstrated how their spatial strategies facilitate the activists' aim to downplay the political dimension of their engagement while offering them an alternative way to articulate their critique towards politicians and officials.

² The name of the festival is a creative word play combining the Serbian name for Belgrade and the word composition of 'velo' (bike) and 'grad' (Serbian for city).

³ In deference to the heterogeneity of the bike activist scene in Belgrade, I use the term 'bike activist' and 'bike activism' to refer to the variety of actors, strategies and attitudes towards cycling.

The ethnographic material on which this paper draws was collected during field work conducted in Belgrade in 2012 and 2013. The field work was focused on various urban movements: the everyday organization, activities and spatial practices of activist groups, their members' individual perspectives on the city, society and activism as well as their relations to each other and public institutions/the state. The research is conducted by participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. Since the activities of the bike activists took place on various sites within and outside of Belgrade – parks, main squares, roads, cafés, cultural centers and so on – as well as within the virtual space – emails, Facebook or Google groups – we decided not only to 'follow the people' [1, p79] but also their ideas and activities in order to grasp how they perceive, interpret and try to change their social world. Thus, the data used in this paper was generated through participating in events and activities of the activist groups and numerous informal conversations with activists. The informants were mainly highly educated, holding a university degree or studying at a faculty in Belgrade. Aged from their early twenties to their mid-sixties, all of them were actively engaged in lobbying for making Belgrade a more livable city by promoting the bike as a means of transport.

The paper is structured in following way: first, we examine cycling in Serbia's capital with regard to urban development documents. Then we investigate the actors of Belgrade's bike activist scene and their use of the term *građanin* as a central marker of their identity and activist engagement. Afterwards, we analyze the activists' spatial strategies and discuss the local appropriation of the *critical mass* to explain the specific context in which the bike activism is taking place.

'Belgrade ain't no Cycling City' – Cycling in Serbia's Capital

Belgrade can be hardly called a bicycle city in comparison to such bicycle friendly cities such as Amsterdam, Copenhagen or Utrecht.⁴ Various local studies demonstrate that the share of bicycles in public traffic is rather low. According to the Traffic Master Plan 2021, [2] only 0.55 per cent of all journeys in 2005 were undertaken by a bicycle, while 24.4 per cent accounted for walking. Furthermore, a survey on modes of transportation shows that only 15.8% of all households in Belgrade have a bike, while the average number of bikes per household is 0.22. [3, p170] The same study entails data that only 1.4 per cent of Belgrade's inhabitants use a bicycle to go to work, while 2.5 per cent uses it two times a week and 1.3 per cent three times a week minimum, compared to 85.5 per cent who never use it. [3, p230] This data is supported by the results of a survey among 500 inhabitants of Belgrade which illustrates that the majority (68.8 per cent of the respondents up to the age of 27 compared to 51

⁴ Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Utrecht are ranked as the top three of bicycle friendly cities worldwide according to the Copenhagenize Index of 2013. This index marks cities 'for their efforts towards re-establishing the bicycle as a feasible, accepted and practical form of transport'.

per cent of respondents older than 27) uses the bike for recreational purposes, entertainment or to keep fit and healthy. [4, p35-36] Simultaneously, the lack of bicycle infrastructure (59.9 per cent), safety in traffic (42.4 per cent) or bicycle facilities, such as racks (22.4 per cent), together with the bad maintenance of streets (17.9 per cent), are stated as the main problems and reasons for people's decision not to use bikes as a mode of transport. [3, p65]

The official view towards cycling is exemplified in official documents, such as the Traffic Master Plan and the General Urban Plan, [5] which aims at planning the urban development until 2021. In those plans, cycling is either defined as a 'non-motorized mode of traffic' altogether with walking or reviewed with the use of motorcycles as 'two-wheeled vehicles'. Although it is stated in the General Urban Plan that 'bike related traffic is expanding worldwide and in Serbia', [5, p986] and therefore the need for necessary conditions for the safe use of bikes, such as traffic regulations or infrastructure is underlined, no further recommendations or strategies are defined. Recommendations, however, exist mainly for walking and motorcycles.

So far 65.5 kilometers of bicycle infrastructure have been built on the territory of whole Belgrade with the majority of bicycle paths existing in the municipalities of New Belgrade and Zemun (50 kilometers). Furthermore, one bicycle path has been constructed along the banks of river Sava that connects the Marina of Dorćol with Ada Ciganlija (7.5 kilometers) – a river island in the Sava River that together with adjoining artificial Sava Lake has become a popular recreational zone in Belgrade. Construction works on this bicycle track were started in 1998 and finished in 2002. Parts of the track had to be reconstructed already in 2011, after 20-year-old activist Filip⁵ had started to make complaints about its bad condition to the city authorities two years before. Motivated by Filip's success, members of the bike association *Ulice za bicikliste* (Streets for cyclists) followed his example and began to collect and report damages on the existing bike paths in Novi Beograd and Zemun to the Secretariat for Traffic (*Sekretarijat za saobraćaj*), which is responsible for the managing and planning of transport on the territory of Belgrade. Although some of the reported damages have been fixed, these measures can only be described by being of cosmetic character, since the construction of additional infrastructure that connects the outskirts of Belgrade with the city center and that allows for safe traffic within the city is still lacking. Even though a study on the expansion of bike infrastructure has been conducted by the Belgrade Faculty for Traffic, on behalf of the Secretariat for Traffic, which concluded that there is potential for about 130 kilometers of additional bike paths until 2021, no single track has been built so far.

Instead, cycling in Belgrade is mostly perceived a leisure activity or sport and less as a mode of commuting by local authorities and urban planners alike. This stance is exemplified by the fact that the first major measurement for facilitating cycling

⁵ According to the ethical guidelines of Anthropological Associations, anthropologists have to ensure confidentiality and thus the anonymity of their respondents.

in Belgrade after the construction of the above mentioned bicycle path from Dorćol to Ada Ciganlija was a bike lift. It was built on the right bank of Sava River at Branko's Bridge in 2005, allowing cyclists who are using the bike path to quickly change from the left to the right bank of the river. Now, both banks of Sava River, which represent another popular recreational zone in Belgrade, are connected to Ada Ciganlija with an additional track around Sava Lake (consisting of eight kilometers) and bike renting stations. The construction of the bike lift itself was the result of an initiative which was started by Belgrade's bike association *Jugo cikling kampanja*.⁶ Although the plans for the lift were presented to the city government already in 1997, 'nothing has happened' as Mirko, the president of *Jugo cikling kampanja*, had noted. Things didn't change until 2002, when cyclists gathered at Branko's Bridge during the second Bike Fest – a collective ride of cyclists through Belgrade organized by *Jugo cikling kampanja* – handed over a petition for the bike lift to city authorities.

The conditions for cycling in Belgrade set the background for people's engagement in bike related activism and groups. Thus, the following section investigates the actors of the bike activist scene in Belgrade and their use of the term *građanin* as a central element of the activists' urban identity and a decisive marker of their urban contestation.

Citizens' struggle for space – Bike activism in Belgrade

The bike activist scene in Belgrade is characterized by the engagement of a wide range of actors, such as 'associations of citizens' (*udruženje građanja*), informal communities of people as well as individuals, while the connections between them are often loose and sometimes only based on personal ties between individual activists. Although there have been efforts by activists to promote cycling in the city already in the 1990s, and at the beginning of the 21st century, the bike activist scene has considerably grown and developed since the organization of the first *critical mass*⁷ in Belgrade in the spring of 2011. Since then the first signs of a bike scene have become apparent with an increasing number of people being interested in cycling in the city and consequently getting engaged in bike activities and activism.

Definitely, the previously mentioned bike association *Jugo cikling kampanja* is the pioneer on Belgrade's bike activist scene, as it has been active since 1998, dedicating its efforts towards the improvement of biking in Belgrade. For several years, *Jugo cikling kampanja* has organized 'Bike Fest', a forerunner of the *critical mass*, during which cyclists gathered at the Republic Square in Belgrade's center and then collec-

⁶ Upon the foundation of the association *Jugo cikling kampanja* ('Jugo cycling campaign') in the year 1998 a reference was made in its name to Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavia finally collapsed, the association didn't change the name but then decided to add an additional meaning to the name 'Jugo cikling' by using a verbal modification and the English translation 'You go cycling' as an invitation for people to ride the bike.

⁷ The *critical mass* is a form of peaceful action that is used by bike activists in cities around the world.

tively took a ride through the city in order to show their presence. Furthermore, it initiated Belgrade's participation in the European Week of Mobility⁸ and has been the member of European Cyclists' Federation (ECF) for many years. The youngest of the bike associations in Belgrade is *Ulice za bicikliste* ('Streets for Cyclists'), which started in 2011 as an informal collective of people organizing the monthly *critical mass* in Belgrade.

Not every association has been engaged in bike activism from its very beginning. While *Jugo cikling kampanja* can be called the veteran among the activist groups, the association *Ciklo svet Srbije* ('Cycle World of Serbia') joined the activist scene rather recently. Although both associations were founded within a time span of only three years, *Ciklo svet Srbije* started as an association in 2001 promoting biking as sport and for recreational purposes. Therefore, the priority was clearly on organizing national and international bike trips. In the meantime, *Ciklo svet Srbije* has broadened its focus and became involved in agitating for the safety of cyclists in traffic and bicycle infrastructure. Ivan, the president of the association, explained that the reason why the association appeared on the activist scene was that 'An increasing number of people are using the bike in the city and this creates new demands and needs.'

The bike activism in Belgrade is characterized by the existence of various different actors⁹ with different priorities and histories of origins, but one common theme that is voiced among the groups is their aim to 'create space for cyclists'. Their claims for space refer to the both material structure and the symbolic quality of space. Regarding the material structure, activists are calling for structural measures to be taken by the city government, such as the building and maintenance of bike paths, bike racks or traffic calmed areas. These structural measures are seen as fundamental to the improvement of the target groups' situation in the city, but they have to be complemented by a political recognition of cyclists as well as raising public awareness and sensibility towards them, which is conceived as the symbolic quality of space. Indeed, to be recognized as equal road user by other traffic users and authorities was pointed out as utmost concern by all bike activists. It was noted before that the majority of Belgraders refrain from using the bike in traffic, especially in the city center. For cyclists, 'being in traffic' meant to be regarded as 'freaks'; they are being cut off by motorized road users, getting shouted at or even injured. Thus, this experience of insecurity and danger became an integral part of cyclist identity.

Furthermore, the activists' claims for space are expressed on the belief that the 'streets belong to everyone' and that as 'citizens' they were entitled to have 'a right to the city' (*pravo na grad*). The notion of the 'right to the city' which has been coined by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1968) is grounded on the idea that everyone

⁸ The European Week of Mobility is an annual awareness raising campaign to promote sustainable transport measures in European cities and municipalities.

⁹ Although Belgrade's bike activist scene is made up of much more groups, individuals and projects than mentioned here, it would go beyond the scope of this paper to examine them in greater detail.

who inhabits a city should be granted the right to appropriate urban space and participate in its production. The notion of ‘the right to the city’ has become the rallying cry of urban movements all over the world and is also used by Belgrade’s activists as a reference. Much more revealing than the appropriation of the term ‘right to the city’ is the activists’ reuse of the term *građanin* (generally translated as ‘citizen’ but literally meaning ‘inhabitant of the city’). Indeed, activists continually stress that ‘we are the citizens’, claiming that it is their status as ‘inhabitants of the city’ which grants them a ‘right to the city’. Thus, the term *građanin* has become a central key word in the urban struggles in Belgrade, serving as a distinct marker of urban identity. Furthermore, the activists continually stress that their engagement for the promotion of bikes ‘has nothing to do with politics’ but that they were, as Belgraders, committed to making Belgrade a nicer, more livable and sustainable city instead.

Regarding the use of the term *građanin*, Zara Volčić has argued that it serves as a symbol for “‘the modern’, resistance, openness and democracy’ [6, p640] while Stef Jansen [7] added that the understanding of *građanin* as modern, intellectual and civilized is based on a rural-urban opposition with the supposed backward and primitive peasant as its counter image. In the same vein, Jessica Greenberg has noted in her analysis of non-participation and apathy in Serbian politics that the term ‘*druga Srbija*’ (other Serbia) is used to designate ‘a modern, intellectual, and urban European milieu against a backwards, nationalist, and culturally retrograde social layer’. [8, p55]

Indeed, perceiving themselves as urban, modern and democratic actors, the activists are directing their enthusiasm towards making Belgrade a better, nicer, more modern place to live by promoting the use of bikes. As such, they turn against city authorities and politicians who are accused of having no will and no understanding or sense for the possibilities that biking offers. Moreover, activists stated that cycling was not just the idea of a bunch of ‘freaks’ but it was about ‘everyday mobility’ and therefore an important issue for the future development of Belgrade. At the same time, they believed that the city authorities and politicians were not able to grasp the potentials and advantages that the cycling had to offer for the city, since they were still rooted in backward and conservative ideas about urban planning. In the same vein, activist Milan noted that this ‘different mindset’ of politicians and city authorities was the reason why they were not open or willing to increase cycling. Instead, Milan was sure that the activists’ meetings with city authorities had to fail, because they preferred to ‘keep it the way it is’, meaning their fixation with motorized traffic users. Also, a 31-year old activist Simon, agreed that city authorities and politicians had ‘zero vision towards biking’ because ‘they don’t feel’ the potential of cycling.

While accusing city authorities and politicians of lacking any sense of modern visions of the city, the activists further associated the political sphere with corruption, inefficiency, (ethnic) nationalism, anti-gay rhetoric and conservative values – ‘traditions’ which they aimed to leave behind. For instance, in his remarks on Serbia, Simon

claimed that the country was governed by ‘authoritarianism’ where only the voice of the political elite and their fellow travellers was allowed. The fact that football hooligans and right-wing groups could walk the streets any time without being banned or arrested was thought as an affront to the bike activists who, on the contrary, had to request permissions for their bike rides through the city. They experienced that these were prohibited by the authorities more than once. In fact, in October 2012, the *critical mass* was prohibited by the municipality of *Stari grad*, under a claim that the event posed too high a security risk due to bad weather forecast (‘snow and clear ice’). But since that week turned out to be quite mild and warm for the end of October, it was clear to the participants that the alleged weather forecast was just a false pretense to keep the cyclists from the streets. Consequently, several participants were drawing parallels to the Gay Pride march which had been banned the same month to point out the lack of will on behalf of authorities to grant cyclists and the LGBT community their right to space. Indeed, such examples showed Simon ‘how the city looks at bike initiatives’, proving that the bike activists were regarded as an undesired group by the authorities and politicians.

Nevertheless, despite the bike activists’ general distrust towards the political elite and city authorities, they were looking for those few allies who were sympathizing with their cause and whom they could trust. In order to push forward their demands on the institutional level, their strategy was to ‘find someone inside the institutions and close to a decision makers’ as Milan puts it – even though this strategy often proved to be a difficult and time-consuming task.

Claiming that they were simply *Beogradani* (‘Belgraders’) who take the matter in their own hands, activists were opposing comparisons with other forms of political activism, such as LGBT activism, or the NGO sector. Although some bike activists were drawing parallels to LGBT activists in order to illustrate how undesired groups were treated by politicians and authorities, they were otherwise keeping a clear distance to political activist groups and NGOs. In fact, they feared that any solidarity with political activists and their cause – even if their aims were similar – would politicize the bike activists’ engagement and thus jeopardize their ‘apolitical’ stance among the public and authorities. Furthermore, the bike activists also distanced themselves from NGOs, since some of the negative characteristics, such as corruption, nepotism and inefficiency which the bike activists associated with the political sphere, were also attributed to the NGO sector. According to the results of an interdisciplinary research project that was conducted between 2010 and 2012 and which analyzed Serbs’ experience and expectations towards democracy in Serbia, a great number of the respondents believed that NGOs were dominated by political parties and external investors, and that they served as institutions for money laundering. [9, p40] In fact, the bike activists’ descriptions of the NGOs as ‘fake organizations’ confirm this prevalent negative image. Thus, by stressing their identity as *gradanin*, the bike activists were distancing themselves from the negative image of NGOs and

political activist groups, while simultaneously putting forward their own trustworthiness and efficiency.

In a nutshell, although Belgrade's bike activist scene is diverse and made up of loosely connected groups and individuals, the activists are joined in their demand for an equal share of urban space. Furthermore, although the bike activism takes up political questions, such as urban planning, mobility or ecological sustainability, the activists play down the political dimension of their engagement. Instead, they stress that they are *građani* who just aim to make Belgrade a greener and more livable city by promoting the bike as a means of transport. The emphasis on the activists' 'apolitical stance' can be traced back to their frustration with politics in general and with the political elite and city authorities in particular, since the activists accuse them of being corrupt, conservative and lacking any sense for the necessity of modern urban development. Since the bike activists' engagement for cycling is both based on their claim for urban space and their activities in space, the following section examines the activists' spatial strategies.

The meaning of space and spatial strategies

Researching Belgrade's bike activism we argue to view space as a category with multiple dimensions, in order to grasp its meaning for the activists' struggle. In his analysis of the anti-Milošević protests in Belgrade in 1996-1997, Stef Jansen has suggested to comprehend space both as 'the ground on which the protests took place, and the representational space in which the events were interpreted'. [10, p38] This also seems a fruitful approach for understanding the meaning of space in the contemporary urban movements. Space is the field where the dangers and the official disregard for cycling as an acknowledged means of transport are being experienced, but it's also the place where the activists' activities are located. Following Alberto Jiménez's approach, we want to add a further dimension of space as a field of action that enables activists' to regain agency. In his ethnographic study on how people construct urban space in the Chilean city of Antofagasta, Jiménez has made a plea for an ontological redefinition of the concept of space, which has been hitherto focused on the 'idioms of place and landscape'. [11, p138] He proposes instead to analyze space as a 'capacity' that is 'a moment of action and a mode of presentation', [11, p142] in order to understand how 'space is constructed as a concatenation of capacities rather than a setting'. [11, p148]

In their aim to re-claim space, Belgrade's bike activists use a broad range of spatial strategies. Although bike activists have also initiated petitions for the improvement of bike infrastructure and traffic safety in the past, they were skeptical and quite critical of the actual outcomes of such petitions. Indeed, there have been only rare occasions when activists have met city authorities and discussed cycling related issues in the last years. Moreover, the activists were unsatisfied with the outcomes of the meetings: 'promises, nothing but empty promises' as they complained. Thus,

some of them resorted to 'do-it-yourself-actions' in order to fix and draw attention to what they perceive the biggest problems for cyclists in the city. During these actions, which some activists described as 'guerilla tactics', the members of *Ulice za Bicikliste* painted for instance bike lanes on a footway over Brankov's Bridge and one street which is used by heavy traffic and cyclists alike to travel towards the city center. Furthermore, in order to increase the public pressure towards authorities and politicians and thus prompt measures to increase cyclists' safety, they started to report careless motorists or damages on the existing bike infrastructure.

Moreover, bike activists deploy various strategies, such as visual signs, humor or collective movement through the city by which they re-appropriate space and show their presence. Especially visual signs, such as posters, banners, self-made traffic signs and graffiti, have come to be used as a tools to make visible what activists perceive as serious safety issues in traffic. One of the most recent actions is called *Bitka za mostove* ('fight for the bridges') and was initiated by members of the bike associations *Ulice za bicikliste* and *Beociklizacija*¹⁰. In their campaign, the activists addressed the disastrous conditions on three of Belgrade's bridges. For example, one of the pathways that are leading over Branko's Bridge had been closed for cyclists and pedestrians in August 2013. Although renovation works were announced on this part on the bridge at the time of closing, no road works had been started so far. Furthermore, the activists claimed that the two other bridges, the Pančevo Bridge and Old Sava Bridge, were full of potential risks – cracks and holes in the asphalt, edges and barriers which don't allow for a safe passage. Therefore, the activists started a campaign to file complaints about the conditions of the bridges and hand them over to the Secretariat for Transport, which would then be forced to react to the substance of the complaints. The campaign was further accompanied by actions on the bridges by which the activists drew public attention to the bridges and their campaign. In December 2013 activists enrolled a banner on Pančevo Bridge with the call 'Repair the pavement on Pančevo Bridge' that was directed at the city government. Three months before, the organizers of the *critical mass* had called participants 'to make posters which we will mount on the fences on [Branko's] bridge' during the bike ride'. Unlike the banner on Pančevo Bridge, the poster was a rather small one but referred to the outstanding renovation works in a funny, subversive manner simply stating 'Repair me. Yours, Branko's Bridge'.

The visual signs in these actions were used to draw the public's attention to the situation on three of Belgrade's bridges in immediate need of repair. Although the actions by which the bridges were marked visually also aimed to mobilize for the campaign, Zoran, one of the involved activists, stated that these 'marketing actions' were indeed important because they allowed the articulation of a clear and quick message.

¹⁰ The name of *Beociklizacija* is a creative composition of Beograd and *cikliranje* ('cycling').

In this regard, bike activists often also used humorous and fun elements in order to address a wider public. On 22nd September 2013, activists of various bike associations celebrated the European Day of Mobility by several related actions in Belgrade. For the first time they reclaimed a street by turning it into a place of fun and enjoying *druženje*. The location that was chosen for this event was Skender Begova Street, a quiet street with only little traffic and a lot of trees. Also, the *Bike Info Centar*, one of the cyclists' gathering places in Belgrade, is located at the beginning of that street as well. In celebration of the European Day of Mobility, a section of Skender Begova Street was turned into a temporary fun site for cyclists. A green space was improvised on parking places in front of *Bike Info Centar* and rounded off by chairs and sunshades. Furthermore, cyclists took pictures with a hand-made traffic sign that stated '30 zone' on the street. Last but not the least, the cyclists also marked a provisional bicycle lane on Skender Begova Street which is a one-way street. By this fun action the activists did not only aimed to draw the attention towards issues of urban mobility, but also transformed the street temporarily and added a new meaning to it. Instead of being reserved for motorized traffic and parking places only, the cyclists pointed out the message to city government that the streets belonged to everyone. Thus, authorities and urban planners should move away from their fixation with cars ('culture of cars') and also respect pedestrians and cyclists in order to solve Belgrade's traffic problems.

Besides the temporary appropriation of space, Belgrade's activists also aim at the production of permanent places where cyclists can meet, exchange knowledge and skills, repair their bikes or just have a fun time over some drinks and 'bike movies'. *Ciklo svet Srbije* was the first association to open a place for cyclists with the *Bike Info Centar* in 2013, which was soon to be followed by the establishment of Belgrade's first bike kitchen¹¹ in May 2014 by a difuze group of people. Indeed, for many bike activists the potential of these places lies in the development of a community that grows together to become a '*critical mass*' and thus being able to successfully push forward cyclists' concerns.

In order to promote the development and growth of a cycling scene in Belgrade, the bike activists have also organized public bike events in the city. Through events, such as the monthly *critical mass*, the yearly bike events by *Jugo cikling kampanja* or the bike festival *Velograd*, they try to draw the public's attention towards cycling as a healthy, fashionable and modern way to live by. The first bike festival *Velograd* was organized in June 2013 by Ralph, an enthusiastic cyclist and the founder of the company *iBikeBelgrade*. Combining the words *velo* (bike) and *grad* (city) for the name of Belgrade's first bike festival, Ralph aimed to create a 'platform' for cyclists and the interested public. Clearly, the *critical mass* events by which the cyclists re-appropriate

11 Bike kitchens represent a further trend in bike communities around the globe. Most commonly the non-profit and community based character of bike kitchens is stressed although they have come to exist in various forms and pursuing a variety of goals.

space and show their presence in the city are the biggest and most popular strategy employed by the activists.

Regarding the organization of public bike events, the cyclists also use their bodies and movement as decisive instruments to show their presence in space. In this regard, Edward Casey has pointed out the interconnection between body, place and 'motion' because '*living bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them' and further '*places belong to living bodies*'. [12, p24] The mutual relation of bodies and places for experience and place-making was apparent in activists' accounts on the importance of 'being in a place'. It has been noted before that the cyclists in Belgrade often encounter dangerous situations in traffic. Due to the perils of cycling, 'being cyclist' therefore implied to 'make a statement', as Ralph put it, no matter if one was riding the bike in the *critical mass* or to the supermarket.

But the cyclists also deliberately used their bodies to claim space in traffic. Milorad, a 27-year-old activist, told us that he preferred to ride the bike right in the middle of the streets to be recognized as part of the traffic, 'I like to ride in the middle of the street because then I am seen as part of the traffic.' Also Simon emphasized that one had to be a dauntless cyclist to make place for oneself, 'I like to annoy them, [the car drivers] because then you get awareness. You have to fight for space.' Furthermore, the use of the cyclists' bodies and their movement has become a central element to the space reclaiming in the course of public bike events, such as the monthly *critical mass*.

The following episode from the field research gives an insight into the character of the *critical mass* events in Belgrade, which combine the use of visual signs, fun elements and movement through the landscape. It was the last Saturday in April 2013, when the second anniversary of the *critical mass* in Belgrade was celebrated, the cyclists gathered at the Republic Square. They mingled there with dozens of passersby, who were strolling along the square, sitting on the stony benches or in the adjoining cafés, simply enjoying themselves or the sunny weather. While waiting for the *critical mass* to begin, more and more cyclists were arriving at the square, dressed in casual clothes, bike sportswear, with helmets or even gloves. Although the majority of participants were in their twenties to thirties, various age groups were present.

While the *critical mass* in Belgrade is organized according to the overall idea of the event – a leaderless group ride that takes place on a monthly basis to demonstrate that cyclists are part of traffic and not blocking it – the activists in Belgrade clearly emphasize that it is 'no protest' but a 'monthly celebration of biking'. This stance is illustrated by the joyful character of the *critical mass* events, which are often guided by changing themes and accompanied by calls for the participants to decorate their bikes, bring accessorize or dress up. This time, several members of the bike association *Ulice za bicikliste* had brought party hats for themselves and colored balloons to decorate the bikes of the participants. Even muffins were distributed shortly before the start of the bike tour in order to point out the anniversary theme. But the *critical mass* was not only about celebration of the the anniversary. It was also used as an

occasion for *Ulice za bicikliste* and *Ciklo svet Srbije* to spread flyers with information about the associations and their claims.

Besides the use of visual signs and fun elements, the *critical mass* events are composed both of the appropriation of space by the cyclists' presence on the Republic Square and during their movement through the city. Moreover, the characteristic of the bike rides is interplay between moving from one place to other, halts on certain places along the route to take group pictures, then resuming the movement and then the halt on the final stop.

Eventually, although the *critical mass* is used to motivate others to use the bike, its distinct aim is to demonstrate cyclists' presence in the city and thus promote the activists' claims vis-à-vis city authorities and politicians. Furthermore, the *critical mass* in Belgrade illuminates the specific context in which the bike activism is taking place and further frames the activists' perception of themselves and their activities. Instead of presenting the *critical mass* as a protest ride, the peaceful and funny character of the events was accentuated by the organizers in order to attract an increasing number of participants to the *critical mass*. Also for Zoran, the *critical mass* was more about combining the activists' claims with having fun than politicizing their cause, which he rather viewed as dangerous and counterproductive. Fearing that any connection of the bike activism with political issues would hold off potential participants to take part in the bike rides, the activists avoided to articulate political statements. This stance was clearly illustrated during the heated debates among the bike activists in September 2013 about whether or not the *next critical mass* should be organized at the same day as the Gay Pride march. Although the Gay Pride march was finally banned for the third consecutive year by the Serbian government due to the alleged safety risk and feared violence by right-wing hooligan groups, the bike ride was moved to another date to avoid any confusion with the expected protests of gay activists. Indeed, many of the bike activists believed that any politicization of their interests and especially the intermingling of their activism with those of the LGBT community would cause a loss of credibility and thus weaken the public's acceptance of their activities.

In this section we have argued for a multidimensional view of space in the analysis of Belgrade's bike activism. Putting the focus on the activists' spatial strategies, it was shown how they use visual signs, fun elements, their bodies and movement in order to re-appropriate and mark urban space and thus attract the public's attention. Furthermore, due to the activists' frustration with city authorities and their lack of cooperation, the former have resorted mostly to 'do-it-yourself-actions' in order to fix and draw attention to what they perceive the biggest problems for cyclists in the city or initiated activities, such as public bike events or community spaces, that help promotion of the development and growth of a cycling scene in the Serbian capital.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored cyclists' 'fight for space' in Belgrade, while focusing on the actors of the bike activist scene and their spatial strategies. Starting with a discussion of the specific context in which the bike activism is taking place, it has been noted that the share of bicycles in traffic is rather low. The disregard of conceiving cycling as a mode of commuting and consequently elaborating measures to increase the share of bikes in public traffic is due to the perception of bikes as leisure activity and sport by urban planners and authorities – a stance that is further exemplified in urban development documents. With the formation of bike activist groups and the development of a bike activist scene in Belgrade, numerous people have started to engage themselves in the promotion of bikes in the city. In this context the bike activists call unanimously for an equal share of urban space. Although the bike activists take up political questions in their engagement for cycling, they play down the political dimension of their activism. Instead, they argue that it 'has nothing to do with politics' and stress that they are merely *građani* who are committed to their city. Furthermore, while being frustrated with corruption and inefficiency among the political elite and further accusing authorities of having no will to change Belgrade for the better, the activists turn away from mainstream politics. Thus, the engagement for cycling offers an escape from the 'dirty business of politics', since it is perceived and presented as an ordinary, non-political issue by the bike activists. Consequently, activists perceive their engagement for the bike as a contribution to urban mobility and questions of Belgrade's future development. Indeed, it is the activists' positioning as *građani* that discloses a way to criticize politicians and authorities without articulating political messages and thus politicizing their cause.

In this regard, the activists' spatial strategies exemplify the specific context in which the bike activism is taking place. With their 'do-it-yourself-actions' and their emphasis on fun elements, the peaceful character of their activities and the simultaneous avoidance of political messages, the activists aim to distance themselves from mainstream politics while seeking to promote public support for their cause and thus strengthen their position vis-à-vis city authorities and politicians.

The example of Belgrade's bike activism underlines the extent to which the political and societal conditions shape the possibilities and constraints of activist movements in the region. In the case of Belgrade the widespread frustration with the political sphere and everything considered political has resulted in activists' turn to urban questions. Cycling and the engagement for bikes represent an ordinary yet popular issue, given the spread of bike movements in cities around the globe, but in the case of Belgrade the bike activism discloses a new field of agency. Moreover, it offers activists a legitimate way to act politically without having to declare themselves political activists or their cause a political one.

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Submitted: 12 / 9 / 2014

Reviewed: 1 / 10 / 2014

Accepted: 12 / 10 / 2014