



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

**Sonia Hirt
Assistant Professor
Program of Urban Affairs and Planning
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia
IARO 2006-2007
Bulgaria and Serbia & Montenegro**

Suburbanizing Sofia: Context and Characteristics of Post-communist Spatial Growth

Topic of research:

The purpose of this project was to examine the nature of peri-urban development that has occurred in the outskirts of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia since the end of communism in 1989. Specifically, the project aimed to determine whether the social and spatial characteristics of Sofia's peri-urban development add fuel to the hypothesis that post-communist cities are undergoing a process of Western-style suburbanization—a process under which relatively affluent households leave the central city in search of a higher quality of life in the urban outskirts. If this hypothesis is confirmed, the study would add fuel to the theoretical claims of renowned urban geographers such as Haussermann (1996) and Sykora (1994), which postulate that post-communist cities are undergoing a transition from communist to capitalist spatial structure.

Relevance and contribution to the field:

The significance of the project lies beyond the disciplinary boundaries of urban geography. By answering the question whether post-communist cities are acquiring

Western-style suburban peripheries, the project contributes to the broader literature concerned with qualifying post-communism as a societal condition. Is post-communism a process of transition toward developed capitalism? Alternatively, does it represent a continuation (or even an exaggeration) of elements of the communist past (Burawoy 1997), or does it entail a combination of communist and capitalist elements (Stark 1996)? If evidence is found that post-communist cities are undergoing Western-style, upper-class suburbanization, then theories of post-communism as a transitional period leading to contemporary, Western-style capitalism will be bolstered. Lack of such evidence will add support to the alternative two theories.

The project has important policy implications. Suburbanization (or urban sprawl) is a process of social stratification which may lead to a higher quality of life for select social groups, yet has negative implications for others, as well as for the environment (e.g., by consuming greenfields). It also tends to negatively impact quality of life in metropolitan areas by increasing traffic congestion and air pollution—both of which are already clearly visible in Sofia. Policies that mitigate these side effects can be instigated only after the nature of peri-urban growth in post-communist cities is well understood.

Immediate publication outcomes:

Because of the heavy amount of research required, the project was divided in two parts: summer 2006 and summer 2007. The IARO Fellowship allowed the completion of the second half of the project. A peer-reviewed journal article, which explored suburbanization in Sofia in historical terms, was published after summer of 2006 (i.e., before the IARO Fellowship). This article appeared in the *Journal of Planning History* (2007, vol. 6, issue 2, pp. 138-165) and is titled: "The Compact versus the Dispersed City: History of Planning Debates on Sofia's Urban Form." Results from the completed project will be integrated in another peer-reviewed publication, which is co-authored with Dr. Kiril Stanilov from the University of Cincinnati. This is a book chapter titled "The Perils of Post-socialist Transformation: Residential Development in Sofia." The chapter will appear in the edited volume *The Post-socialist City: Urban Form and Space Transformations in Central and Eastern Europe*. The manuscript will be published by Springer Press in October 2007 and will feature an acknowledgment to IREX. A copy will be emailed to IREX immediately after publication.

Collateral research:

As was specified in the IARO research proposal, I hoped to expand the project by incorporating the Serbian capital of Belgrade. A Sofia-Belgrade comparison will allow testing of whether the research outcomes are generalizable across different Southeast European post-communist settings. In order to advance this research agenda, I made a short but very productive visit to Belgrade. As a result, I now firmly plan to replicate the research in the Serbian capital in 2008 in collaboration with Dr. Mina Petrovic, Assistant Professor of Urban Sociology at Belgrade University, and Zaklina Gligorijevic, Assistant Director of Belgrade's Town Planning Institute.

Research approach and methodology:

The research relied on multiple sources. These include government data (e.g., the population and housing census), review of documents (the metropolitan master plan, the strategic plan, local plans, and pertinent housing policy materials), a standardized survey

with 400 residents of the fastest-growing peri-urban area of Sofia (the so-called Vitosha District, which is located on the south side of the city), twenty in-depth interviews with urban policy-makers and twenty in-depth interviews with residents of the peri-urban Vitosha District. The standardized survey was conducted among a random sample of households generated from a full list of households in the area. It was implemented with the aid of Dr. Emilia Chengelova, Senior Research Associate Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in Sofia. The urban policy-makers, who were interviewed, were chosen via the reputational method. They included Sofia's Chief Architect, the Chief Architect and the Vice-Mayor of the Vitosha District, leaders of the Master Planning Division and the Center for Territorial Development, and urban planning and urban geography academics. The local residents, who were interviewed, comprised both long-time residents (who had settled in the Vitosha District prior to 1989) and newcomers (who had moved to the Vitosha District after 1989). The goal of the latter in-depth interviews was to build a richer ethnographic understanding of the quality of life in peri-urban Sofia from the viewpoints of both those who resided there during communism and those who came after its end. Thus far, the results of 150 standardized questionnaires have been entered into a database and analyzed. About three quarters of the in-depth interviews have been translated into English, transcribed and coded. The data from the remaining 250 standardized questionnaires and eight in-depth interviews will be entered and analyzed by the end of 2007.

Summary of research findings:

Results from the standardized survey: A process of suburbanization confirmed

Based on the preliminary analysis of data, we may conclude that the process of peri-urban development in Sofia broadly follows the pattern of suburbanization, which is typical of capitalist cities. In other words, the post-1989 process of peri-urban growth is driven primarily by relatively affluent households who are leaving the central city in search of a higher quality of life. This post-communist process is sharply distinct from the process of peri-urban growth which occurred under communism. This is evidenced by the fact that households who settled in Sofia's outskirts after the end of communism belong to a different socio-economic stratum as compared to households who came to the urban outskirts before communism's end. The two types of households also tend to have different motivations for relocation and different places of origin. Specifically, post-communist newcomers are better educated, more likely to hold professional jobs and, perhaps most notably, are much wealthier than their counterparts who settled in peri-urban Sofia during the communist period (e.g., over 40 percent of newcomer households in the random sample have monthly income of more than 2,000 Bulgarian Lev, or \$1,345, which is about four times the national average; whereas only 5 percent of long-term households report such income). Newcomer households are also more likely to own cars and live in large residences, as well as more likely to come to the suburban periphery from the central city: 68 percent of newcomer households in the random sample had left central Sofia, whereas the corresponding percentage among long-term households was only 34. Newcomer households are typically motivated by a search for higher quality of life, which they hope to find in suburban areas. They perceive the city as polluted and overcrowded and look for better living conditions in more private and greener suburban settings—a motivation which they share with Western suburbanites. In contrast, long-term households residing in Sofia's outskirts had often relocated not in search of higher quality of life, but rather for various economic or family-related reasons (e.g., they left provincial towns because they found jobs in Sofia's factories in the 1970s

or 1980s; or they had long-standing roots in the once-rural environs of Sofia and had inherited modest residential property in the area, etc.).

In short then, the above-described results suggest that peri-urban development after communism is driven by a very different socio-economic stratum of the population as compared to the peri-urban development which occurred during communism. Thus, the results add fuel to theoretical claims that the communist and the post-communist periods signify very different eras in urban development and the post-communist city is acquiring the spatial features of the capitalist city.

Results from the in-depth interviews with residents: Social relations in the suburbs

The evidence also suggests that Sofia's outskirts are in the process of transition—the relocation of new and wealthier households has inflated housing prices and caused a substantial increase in taxes. Thus, long-term residents are under an increasing pressure to sell their family properties and relocate to cheaper parts of the metropolis. Arguably then, the process through which the once-modest environs of Sofia are suburbanizing is essentially a process of gentrification—a process under which relatively poor indigenous inhabitants are continuously displaced by wealthier newcomers. The trend is, of course, very common in Western settings. What gives post-socialist Sofia a different flavor is the location where gentrification occurs—right at the urban edge, instead of in the city center or in non-metropolitan rural settings, as is currently typical of the United States and Western Europe. But regardless of this difference, it seems that the social outcomes of peri-urban gentrification are like those of urban and rural gentrification, as described in the literature—an increase in property values leading to the exodus of embittered long-time residents; a breakdown of cohesive community character; and the emergence of two distinct social strata, who may live side by side (at least temporarily), yet have few things in common and treat each other with mutual suspicion. The in-depth interviews with long-time residents revealed these outcomes well:

“I used to be the local tax inspector here, in Simeonovo, for 20 years, until 1990. I used to know who lives in every single house. But now I don't know the people even right around us. Many of the old owners sold their houses to richer people so that they can have money to live on. Or very often, when the old owner dies, his/her children sell it. In 10 years, there will be no place for people like us here.”

“We [the new neighbors and I] have nothing in common. We are ‘we’ and they are ‘they.’ For me, they may just as well be from another planet. And I barely see their faces anyway. I walk around quite a bit ... walk to the store, walk to the bus stop to go to the city. But they only...get from the cars right into garage... If I see them, I say ‘good day,’ they say ‘good day,’ and that's all there is to say.”

The sharp culture cleavage is also well reflected in the comments of newcomers:

“It's an interesting area to live in. Certainly, there are many benefits to living here as opposed to in the city. But, there are also some things you don't get in the city. Like, seriously, I am in a hurry for a meeting in Sofia and I need to stop for someone walking their entire herd of sheep right in front of my car. And when I say walking, I mean that if they would go any slower, they would have to stop. Now, I don't really have anything bad to say about these people. I mean, most seem friendly and nice enough, aside from the fact that they seem to move through life at a speed lower

than mine... However, when we first moved in, we did get a lot of people peeking into the yard. And trying to start a conversation and sometimes coming up with some tear-jerker story to ask me to give them money. And then we got robbed twice. So, finally, we built the gates and installed a video camera and an alarm system. Now, I am not into the prison-look, but how else can I protect my property and my privacy?"

Results from interviews with policy-makers: The view of the municipal authorities

Thus far, the response of Sofia's urban planning authorities to suburbanization and peri-urban gentrification has been ambiguous. Official planning documents advocate that Sofia become a dispersed city. The plan for the Vitosha District welcomes low-density peri-urban residential development in order to enable at least some municipal residents to live in "ecological conditions" and "closer to nature," although it raises a concern about vanishing public green spaces. The plans were criticized by environmental groups worried about the impacts of growth and by experts who claimed that Sofia has vacant *urban* territories for 260,000 new dwelling units and thus needs no suburban periphery. Yet the prevailing view of the municipal authorities was that urban density and compactness were the sorry outcome of two factors typical of communist (as opposed to democratic) Sofia: lower standard of living and lack of a free market. From their viewpoint, not only should Sofia suburbanize, but the process of displacement of poorer peri-urban residents by wealthier newcomers is a natural product of the free market which benefits both groups.

In summary then, we may conclude that the process of suburbanizing Sofia following the Western model is well underway. The process has both positive and negative social and environmental consequences and generally meets the approval of Sofia's authorities.

Future research:

As already noted, next year the research will be replicated in the Serbian capital of Belgrade. Preliminary negotiations are underway with faculty from the University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest. If successful, these negotiations may lead to expanding the research to include the Romanian capital as well.

The research will expand in two additional conceptual areas. First, I intend to explore the implications of suburbanization in Sofia (and potentially Belgrade and Bucharest) specifically for suburban women's access to urban jobs and services, and therefore, for their social status. Second, I plan to examine residents' motivations for one of the most prevailing, yet shocking phenomena which I observed in the post-communist suburbs—the astounding proliferation of gated, walled-off and fortified new single-family homes. There is already a vast literature in urban sociology and cultural anthropology on gated and walled-off residential spaces in the United States and some other parts of the world. My project will add a uniquely post-communist perspective to this important body of literature.

Recommendations for the policy community:

While the recent and ongoing suburbanization of Sofia may be driven by conscious decisions on behalf of certain socio-economic strata and may bring benefits to them, it has also negatively impacted the quality of life of long-term residents of Sofia's periphery, and has led to a loss of public greenery and increased commuter traffic. If

Sofia is to suburbanize fully, following the model of many U.S. cities, its now vibrant downtown may experience the type of decay we see in cities like Detroit or Cleveland.

Rather than wholeheartedly embracing suburbanization, Sofia's policy-makers will be well advised to learn from the problems which suburbanization has inflicted upon many U.S. cities. American urban policy-makers have recently invented many appropriate tools which can at least partially mitigate problems related to urban sprawl. These tools include: Transfer of Development Rights (a financial mechanism which compensates landowners and redirects them to build in already heavily urbanized areas, thus saving greenfields in the urban outskirts); impact fees (which charge developers for the construction of new residential areas in order to allow the municipality to erect the appropriate infrastructure); and tax incentives designed to maintain the supply of affordable housing in select areas (thus partially slowing down gentrification). U.S. policy makers can encourage learning and the potential transfer of such urban planning mechanisms to East European cities in order to mitigate some of the negative impacts of suburbanization. Such learning exchanges at the municipal level have gained great notoriety in recent years. Current programs at the German Marshall Fund and the Woodrow Wilson Institute dedicated to discovering the best urban development practices across the North Atlantic may well serve as potential models and venues of exchange.

References:

Burawoy, M., 1997, The state and economic involution: Russia through China lens. In P. Evans, editor, *State-Society Synergy: Government and Social Capital in Development*. Berkley: University of California Press, 150-177.

Haussermann, H., 1996, From the socialist to the capitalist city: Experiences from Germany. In G. Andrusz, M. Harloe and I. Szelenyi, editors, *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*. Malden: Blackwell, 214-231.

Stark, D., 1996, Recombinant property in East European capitalism. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 101 (4), 993-1027.

Sykora, L., 1994, Local urban restructuring as a mirror of globalization processes: Prague in the 1990s. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 31 (7), 1149-1166.