

“OUR CAPITAL’S IMPROVEMENT”: THE ROLE OF PRINCE ALEXANDER I IN BUILDING SOFIA AS A CAPITAL CITY OF BULGARIA

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Abstract: The text examines the contributions of Bulgaria’s first monarch in the modern epoch, Prince Alexander I, for modernisation of the new capital city of Sofia. Prince Alexander I’s direct involvement in various urban modernisation project is traced through several accounts from the epoch. The article argues that building the new capital city had wider implications for Bulgarian modernisation in the late 19th-century while the generally neglected role of Prince Alexander I in urban change should be considered together with other more well-known and researched actors.

Keywords: Sofia; Bulgaria; urban modernisation; Prince Alexander I; late 19th-century

Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria since the establishment of the modern state in 1878, has undergone profound transformations in its efforts to affirm itself as a leading urban centre and engine of the country's overall modernisation. In the middle of the 19th century, Sofia was a medium-sized Ottoman urban centre with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. It lacked proper urban planning and any contemporary urban infrastructure. However, within less than three decades, this situation changed profoundly, and Sofia was rebuilt as a well-organised European urban centre.

Many different actors contributed to the processes of urban change in the Bulgarian capital city. The local authorities and foreign architects and engineers have done a lot for modernising the capital city, an aspect of urban change that has received significant scholarly attention. In that regard, the role of Prince Alexander I, the first monarch of the Principality of Bulgaria established in 1878, in urban modernisation projects seems somewhat neglected in existing historical accounts. Yet, Prince Alexander I was in fact quite actively involved in matters concerning Bulgaria’s new capital city as various documents from the epoch show. The aim of this text is thus to examine in more detail and to shed more light on a less-known aspect of Prince Alexander I’s career,

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namely the efforts of Bulgaria’s first monarch in the modern period to contribute to building a new capital city.

Prince Alexander I, the first ruler of the autonomous Principality of Bulgaria who reigned between 1879 and 1886, is known primarily for his role in affirming the newly created Bulgarian state. He also succeeded in defending the unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, including with decisive and brave actions in the brief Serbo-Bulgarian War in 1885. When examining his initiatives in Sofia, one should take into account that urban change took place in exceptionally challenging times. For example, a major concern in the newly liberated country was that virtually all institutions of a modern state needed to be established nearly from scratch. The process was further complicated by various internal struggles and foreign crises.

Sofia was chosen as Bulgaria’s capital city in April 1879, a year after the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria by the Berlin Treaty of 1878. Alexander, also known by the name of his family as Alexander of Battenberg, was approved as the head of state several days later, following a compromise between the Great Powers, with the support of the Russian emperor Alexander II for the young German prince being a key one. So, those two choices for the state concerning the head of state and the capital city were taken at almost the same time.

It should be noted that Sofia, an administrative centre in the Ottoman Empire that decayed in the course of the 19th century, was not the sole candidate for becoming Bulgaria’s capital city. Sofia was not the leading urban centre in economic, social or cultural terms. Other potential choices included the historical capital Tarnovo or Ruse, the better developed at that time and well connected with Europe port on the Danube. In the Bulgarian case, the decision for the capital city was primarily motivated by political and strategic considerations. Despite its potential, Sofia was very chaotic and quite badly organised around the time it was selected as the capital city.

That Sofia’s transformation was an urgent understanding that was shared by many contemporaries. Both foreign visitors and many people who came to the Bulgarian capital city from other Bulgarian towns described it as a chaotic and poorly built settlement.

In that respect, the accounts of Konstantin Jireček, the Czech slavist and historian who came to work in Sofia around the same time as Prince Alexander arrived in the country, seem quite relevant, as Jireček had a similar Austro-Hungarian background as the new monarch. Jireček mentioned in his diary many times the mud on the streets of Sofia, a major problem for many of the newcomers to the new capital city. His first impressions from the Bulgarian capital, which he saw for the first time in November 1879, were not positive at all. As he put it: „A crooked street with trees, open oriental shops scattered about, a terrible uneven sidewalk and terrible mud. A large village! Finally, an

open square. On the left a one-story house with 16 windows on the facade and a guard at the entrance. This must be the palace“.¹

Another proper example to illustrate the general state could be the remarks of Petar Neykov, the Bulgarian diplomat and writer who was born in Brăila and grew up in this Romanian city and also the Bulgarian Svishtov. Neykov wrote in his later published autobiography that “...in 1883 Sofia was still a small, dusty or muddy and poor oriental capital”.²

Similar to this account are the comments of Sultana Racho Petrova, the wife of General Racho Petrov, a court lady and one of the influential figures in the higher circles in the Bulgarian capital. Sultana Racho Petrova, who grew up in a middle-class family and received an elite education in Bucharest, complained that in Sofia there were no proper streets; all roads were covered by sticky mud in days with bad weather. She described Sofia as “a large village in which here and there stood a few one-story houses, not to mention the streets—there were no streets at all: marshes, deep holes, pitfalls, knee-deep dust, which in rainy weather turned into sticky mud and made movement impossible “.³

There are analogous observations made by Prince Alexander I. At the time he came to Bulgaria, the young officer and participant in the Russia-Turkish war (1877-1878) was just 22 years old. Although he had no specific political or administrative experience, he didn't remain a passive observer, including on matters concerning the capital city. The monarch took measures to address some of the most urgent urban problems just a few months after he took the throne. There is a letter he wrote to Sofia's municipal council in October 1879 that clearly demonstrates the direct involvement of the monarch in urban issues. In this letter, Prince Alexander concluded that the moment had come for “Our Capital's improvement”, providing a brief plan for the general situation in the city.

“As we had the occasion to inspect most of the main streets in Our Capital, we saw with displeasure that their state is most unsatisfactory to the inhabitants; if the main streets are in such a state, what should we think of the secondary streets? This means that the options for easy movement in Our Capital are completely unsatisfactory. Therefore, having taken into account that now is the time to take positive measures for building, improving and developing our capital, we are pleased to order I) the establishment of a special commission including four members - one of the members of the municipal city government, one citizen from the capital, one doctor, and one engineer.

¹ Константин Иречек, *Български дневник* (София: Св. Георги Победоносец, 2016), I, 36.

² Петър Нейков, *Завчера и вчера: Скици от миналото* (София: Български писател, 1959), 54.

³ Султана Рачо Петрова, *Моите спомени* (София : БАН, 1991), 158.

II) This commission has the goal to determine how the streets will be repaired, canalised, and illuminated. III) Upon the establishment of the Commission, it should present itself in Our Palace to receive our instructions for its activities”.⁴

This early initiative is a good example of Prince Alexander I’s approach to problems in the capital city. The monarch dared to intervene without delay and personally engaged, taking the responsibility to directly oversee the work of the newly created administrative body. The available documentation shows that the commission started work by inspecting the available infrastructure, the needs of the population, and sources of possible income for financing the urban renovation measures.⁵

In spite of all other urgent challenges that the newly created Principality of Bulgaria faced, some more strategic goals and urban renovation projects in the capital city were not neglected. In this respect could be highlighted that the project to manage Sofia’s future development through a contemporary urban master plan was made part of the national political agenda. In addition to his previous engagements with urban problems, Prince Alexander I personally took part in the preparations of Sofia’s first urban plan. Moreover, Prince Alexander’s personal and active involvement in the process should be emphasised.

An important moment is that the urban planning activities marked a fundamental shift in how Sofia had to be managed and how it should transform into a modern European capital city. So, the question of planning the Bulgarian capital city was not only a technical matter but also one having much wider implications and that was well understood by the political elite, with Prince Alexander having a distinct role in this respect. The other important aspect is that the authorities commissioned an ambitious project for a plan that covers the entire urban territory instead of piecemeal solutions, which would be much easier. On the basis of the urban plan that was approved in the first year of Prince Alexander I’s reign, the physical structure of Sofia was drastically transformed within the following two decades.

There is a first-hand account showing how the monarch directly took part in the discussions with ministers and various experts concerning Sofia’s new urban plan. Moreover, it seems that Prince Alexander I was one of the active forces in this process of urban modernization, not a usual role for a monarch. Konstantin Jireček, who, being appointed at that moment as a secretary of the Ministry of Education and having good contacts in the ruling circles was well informed about the current matters. He wrote in November 1879 that “by a special order of the prince, the new plan of the city and projects for removing the mud and paving are being started”.⁶ Although this is a very

⁴ Централен държавен архив, ДА-София, ф. 1К, оп. 3, а.е. 153, л. 1.

⁵ Централен държавен архив, л. 2.

⁶ Иречек, *Български*, 45.

short mention, it still clearly testifies to the active role that was played by the monarch.

The fact that the new urban plan was expected to hurt various interests, including the interests of large real-estate owners, led to the proposal of an alternative vision for urban development. Prince Alexander I was visited in November 1879 by a delegation that proposed an idea for two parallel urban cores – the old part of the city should be kept as it existed at that moment, while urban planning should be applied only to newly developed areas. This idea was discussed at a special meeting chaired by Prince Alexander I. It was rejected with the argument that although executing a plan for the entire city would take much longer and would need huge investments, this would be the only way to improve and modernize all parts of the city.⁷

There are two more entries in Jireček's diary which give us additional information on the adoption of the final version of Sofia's first urban master plan. As the process of the first technical preparations advanced, Prince Alexander I convened ministers and advisors in his personal residence to discuss improvements in the capital city, a meeting that took place on 3 January 1880. This meeting was attended by ministers, but no one from Sofia's city council was invited, a fact that clearly indicates the quite limited circle that took decisions at this early stage. It also illustrates the secondary role played by the local authorities, which still needed to affirm their positions in a country that lacked traditions in local governance. Sofia's city doctor also attended the meeting convened by the monarch, a fact illustrating the social and sanitary relevance of the urban planning project.

Prince Alexander I and the participants in this meeting agreed on the setup of a new street network with straight and much wider streets – “the entire old city should be regulated in an American style with new streets,” as Jireček put it. The proposals being discussed at this meeting also included several new wide boulevards which were planned to be as much as 28 metres wide, a lavish attribution of space to roads that could not be left unnoticed compared to the very narrow streets of the Ottoman layout of the town.⁸

In April 1880, Sofia's master plan was approved by both the Parliament and by Prince Alexander I. The new urban plan became a fact just less than two years after the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria and less than a year after Sofia became the capital city. In spite of the fact that the urban plan was designed by experts, in the Bulgarian historiography it is indicatively called the

⁷ Георги Георгиев, *София и софиянци 1878-1944 : Изследване* (София : Наука и изкуство, 1982), 26-27.

⁸ Иречек, *Български*, 74.

“Battenberg plan”, clearly highlighting the role of Prince Alexander I in initiating the process and his participation in various stages of its execution.⁹

The third account in Jireček’s diaries provides additional aspects of Prince Alexander I’s involvement with Sofia’s urban plan. According to an entry from May 1880, the monarch led a delegation of various officials, including several of its ministers, that made a long inspection riding horses of various places that should be changed by the new urban plan. The delegation visited both places in the old town and more remote sites in its surroundings.¹⁰

The general concept behind Sofia’s first urban master plan deserves some additional attention. The wide new boulevards not only anticipated future population growth and increased traffic in the capital city, but these modern arteries also had clearly representative functions. In addition to the more practical aspect, there were various symbolic elements. So, the location where the main arteries within the old city converged was also changed. The main traffic hub of the city was moved from the space around the Banya Bashi Mosque, one landmark that was strongly related to the Ottoman town, to a nearby new square around the Saint Nedelya church, the main Eastern Orthodox church in Sofia at that time.

The new urban plan also envisaged several big new squares in the central part of Sofia, some of which were designed to hold future monuments, highlighting the importance of representative public spaces in the capital city again. In front of the royal palace was designed the first public urban garden, the so-called Aleksandrovska garden, which was one of the first implemented elements.

It should be noted, however, that most of this first urban plan remained on paper in the first few years after its adoption. In the early 1880s, just a few of the newly planned streets, mainly in the very central area of the city as this large project was delayed by the lack of capacity and finances combined with an unstable political situation. The actual large-scale execution of the plan started in the late 1880s and the early 1890s, after Prince Alexander I’s resignation in 1886.

In the new capital city, not only the unregulated and uncovered streets were a major concern. The first several years of Sofia as a capital city were also marked by the lack of a sufficient number of bigger and solid buildings, which led to the need to host various new institutions in various temporary solutions. So, the National Assembly initially gathered in a large wooden barrack, which was originally built by the Russian army during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). The ministries were located in one of the few more solid houses of the Ottoman town. According to an early account of Konstantin Jireček. “[A]ll the

⁹ Добрина Желева-Мартинс, *Биография на София: Исторически студии* (София: Пространство-форма, 2006), 58-66, 76-77.

¹⁰ Иречек, *Български*, 124.

ministries are near the National Assembly, in a large, white-blue (wooden) house. Large corridors, high ceilings and European windows. Inside, uncleanliness, clerks in the corridors. I went to the Ministry of Education - the ministry thing is in one room".¹¹

In that respect, the prince's residence was logically a main concern. The old Turkish *konak*, the main premises of the Ottoman administration and one of the few representative existing buildings, was hurriedly refurbished for the needs of Prince Alexander I. Although building a completely new palace was considered an option, it appeared to be too costly a project for the state finances. Instead, the monarch and the Cabinet agreed on a big reconstruction of the existing *konak* building.

In 1879, Prince Alexander I commissioned the Austrian architect Viktor Rumpelmayer to design a new royal residence by rebuilding the old *konak*. The mansion was radically changed between 1880 and 1882. The roof was raised, the western part was extended, and the interior was fundamentally changed. The facade was significantly transformed, but it still remained one of the few surviving old elements of the old building. The architect Rumpelmayer designed the residence of Prince Alexander I in the neo-Baroque style. The royal palace was considered to be the first monumental building in the capital and, indeed, it was one of the first landmarks noticed by visitors. The cost of the residence, however, soon surpassed the initial forecasts, and the government progressively increased its budget.

In the meantime, Prince Alexander I lived in the so-called "small palace", a one-story massive stone building, which was built by Russian General Parensov, who was appointed Minister of War in the autumn of 1879. When, in the spring of 1880, Parensov was dismissed and left for Russia, Prince Alexander I bought this house and lived in it for almost two years, while the palace was being renovated. This remained his property until he was forced to depart from the country. There is another building that was related to the monarch. Initially, he wanted to rebuild the so-called Çelebi Mosque, located next to the palace, into a Lutheran church. However, due to political tensions, this did not happen, and the mosque was demolished to make place for the construction of the western wing of the palace. Afterward, Prince Alexander I, commissioned the building of a new Lutheran church, which was located on the main "Dondukov" boulevard.

In spite of the fact that these were just the first steps in the urban modernization efforts, there were some results that started to change the overall appearance of the capital city. For example, the Italian journalist Viko Mantegaca, who visited Sofia at the end of 1886, just a few months after Prince Alexander I was removed from the throne, noted clear changes in the urban

¹¹ Иречек, *Български*, 37.

appearance. The Italian traveller wrote that: [T]he new part of the city, the European quarter, begins with the “*konak*” - the prince’s palace - whose main facade overlooks a large square, which you reach after passing the bazaar. The palace, with a garden in front, is a beautiful building...”.¹² Mantegaca’s account clearly differs from all earlier observations and documents the first visible signs of improvement.

Prince Alexander I abdicated from the Bulgarian throne in 1886, following years of significantly troubled relations and political pressure from Russia. Prince Alexander I died in exile in 1893 at only 36 years of age. His contributions to the state and the capital city are commemorated in several ways in Sofia. A small mausoleum in a central location was built between 1894 and 1895. A central square, bordering the western gate of the palace, and a central street were named after Prince Alexander I. Also, a village in the south-western surroundings of Sofia at the foot of Vitosha Mountain, a place which became a favourite walking spot for Prince Alexander I, was renamed Knyazhevo (derived from *knyaz*, meaning Prince in Bulgarian) in his honour.

¹² Вико Мантегаца, *Два месеца в България: Октомври и ноември 1886: Бележки на един очевидец* (Пловдив: Книжарницата на Ив. Г. Игнатов, 1899), accessed June 2026, <https://stara-sofia.blogspot.com/2014/10/1886-3.html>.