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## **CONVERSION OF THE RIGHT OF USE ON CONSTRUCTION LAND INTO THE RIGHT OF OWNERSHIP IN THE POSITIVE LAW OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the legal situation concerning civil matters related to the conversion of the right of use on construction land into the right of ownership under the positive law of the Republic of Serbia. This is a complex civil law issue that, for many years, was not adequately regulated within Serbia's legal system, resulting in legal uncertainty and the failure to resolve several tens of thousands of cases. By applying historical, comparative legal, and dogmatic legal methods, as well as content analysis of relevant legal documents, the paper presents an argumentative examination of the provisions of numerous laws that address this matter both directly and indirectly. Specifically, it focuses on the provisions of the Law on Planning and Construction, the Law on Legalization of Buildings, and provisions of other related laws. The paper offers a reasoned legal interpretation of several legal acts, overcoming the imprecision in the regulation of this important civil law matter, and proposes a solution for the accumulated cases involving the conversion of the right of use into the right of ownership for residential buildings constructed without a building permit, as well as the construction land on which these buildings were erected, allocated for use with a fee by the relevant state administrative bodies of local self-government.

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## 1. Introduction

The legal term “construction land” was established by the adoption of the (Law on Nationalization of Buildings for Rent and Construction Land, 1952) and the (Federal Law on Expropriation, 1957). The owner of a building on construction land had the right to use the land under the building necessary for the regular use of the building. This right to use the land cannot be transferred independently; it is transferred by transferring the constructed object, that is, the building on the

This paper will discuss the complex civil legal issue of converting the right of use on construction land into a property right under the positive law of the Republic of Serbia. In the scientific consideration of this important legal issue, the logical, fragmentary historical, dogmatic legal, and comparative legal methods were employed. Additionally, the economic method was used to examine the economic effects of some proposals, and the method of qualitative analysis, including induction and deduction, was applied to the content of relevant legal documents listed in the consulted literature.

Roman law faced this question and answered it by prescribing and applying the principle of *superficies solo cedit* (Gaj, 1982, II 73. p. 107). According to this principle, all buildings that are constructed of solid material and are permanently connected to the land are considered a legal unity and are the property of the landowner. “In Roman law and later in legal orders based on the Roman legal tradition, this separation was carried out by superficiary law, and in the Germanic legal area, by construction law” (Lazić, 1991. p. 220).

Spatial planning of Paris was carried out in the middle of the 19th century. “The first regulations on mandatory spatial planning of cities, which represented a limitation of ownership rights on urban land, were passed in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Sweden passed such regulations in 1874, and the Netherlands in 1901”. Furthermore, for the purposes of planned construction, “in capitalist societies, this problem was solved by land expropriation and the right to build” (Simonetti, 1983, pp. 36–38). In socialist societies, the problem was solved by nationalization; in Serbia, this was achieved by socializing construction land.

Comparatively speaking, in our environment in the Republic of Croatia, the amendment of the Law on Basic Ownership-Legal Relations (abbreviated as ZOSPO) replaced the right of use with the right of ownership. Additionally, the legal unity of buildings with land was established by the adoption of the Law on Ownership and Other Real Rights of the Republic of Croatia in 1996.

In the Republic of BiH in 1995, specifically in the Federation of BiH with the adoption of ZOSPO, it was prescribed that urban construction land could be in both state and private ownership. The legal unity of real estate was addressed by the adoption of the ZGZ FBiH, which provided for denationalization but not restitution. "However, this happened through inversion: from the building to the land" (Povlakić, 2009. p. 149).

Today, in the Republic of Serbia, with the introduction of superficiary law, the process of converting state and public property on construction land, on which private property has been built, into private property is underway.

Laws passed after 1989 only gradually prescribed legal relationships, and the changes were not fast enough. In recent times, there are current provisions addressing this issue, such as the (Law on Planning and Construction of the Republic of Serbia, 2009). The amendments to this law enabled the conversion of the right of use to direct ownership (hereinafter: the Law on Planning and Construction). Additionally, there are provisions like the (Law on Conversion of the Right of Use into the Right of Ownership on Construction Land with Compensation, 2015), which ceased to be valid with the adoption of the (Amendment to the Law on Planning and Construction, 2023) and the (Law on Legitimation of Buildings, 2015). Upon the entry into force of these amendments, the (Law on Legalization of Buildings, 2013) and the (Law on Special Conditions for Registration of Ownership Rights on Buildings Built Without a Building Permit, 2013) also ceased to be valid.

Plot, parcelization (i.e., reparcelation), determination, and formation of a cadastral plot (hereinafter referred to as KP) are fundamental and important aspects for defining this right. If the separation of the cadastral parcel was carried out on the ground but was not entered in the cadastral books, it is necessary to request a certificate from the authority responsible for state surveying and cadastre. This certificate should confirm whether the marking was carried out, the formation of the KP, and on what basis (Article 70, paragraph 11 of the Law on Planning and Construction, 2009). We will return to the issue of subdivision later in this paper.

## **2. Instances of Converting the Right of Use on Construction Land into Ownership Rights**

The earlier and latest amendments to the current 2009 Law on Planning and Construction have made visible progress.

First, if a building with several special (residential) units was constructed after obtaining a building permit, and the ownership rights of the housing

units were registered, but the co-ownership was not registered. Co-ownership is the property of two or more persons on the same thing and the right of each co-owner is ideally determined, but it refers to the whole thing and to every smallest part of it (Mirošavić, 2019. p. 91). in the cadastral parcel where the building was constructed, and there is a registered right of use on state-owned land, it is sufficient to submit a request to the Republic Geodetic Institute for the registration of the right of ownership, i.e., co-ownership, which will be carried out *ex officio*.

Let us add that if it concerns nationalized built-up land, the restitution of the built-up land will not be carried out; instead, compensation will be paid (Mirošavić, 2020. p. 123.). In the database of the reported property, less than 20% of the area of the land that was confiscated is claimed, and with restitution, the state would become the legitimate owner of over 80% of the construction land. (Glišić, 2024, p. 72).

Secondly, in the event that a building was constructed based on a building permit, but the investor never carried out the technical acceptance of the building, which is unfortunately a frequent occurrence in Belgrade and Serbia, and without consequences for the investor, if there is no urban planning project of the completed works that defines the square footage owned by the parties, the right of ownership of the object or part of the object, and joint ownership of the common premises, or if there is no geodetic study on the plot on which the object is built, then it is not possible to make an entry in the cadastral book of the object or to determine the KP for regular use of the facility. In this case, it is not about legalization, but it is necessary to prepare the mentioned documentation with the urban project of the completed works and the geodetic study of the plot, perform the technical acceptance of the building, and enter the building and the plot on which the building is built in the cadastral books. Only then can individual owners, both of the building and parts of the building, be registered as holders of ownership rights, with which the right of joint ownership of the common premises is inextricably linked, as well as the right of co-ownership of the KP on which the building is built, permanent co-ownership (Mirošavić, 2019. p. 99).

Buyers and citizens, in their desire to solve the housing issue, have been entering into unresolved, unregistered property relations for decades, just to secure a crucial need—a roof over their heads. Meanwhile, state authorities have calmly watched as investors failed to fulfill their obligations to obtain use permits and register the properties in the cadastral books. This neglect has compromised the quality of constructed works and compliance with construction norms and rules, such as protection against earthquakes, fires,

and insulation quality. Since the mid-20th century, the state has defined the process of obtaining a building permit as an administrative relationship between the investor and the administrative body. However, it has left the execution of the final obligation to obtain a use permit to the civil relations of the parties and the regular court system. Instead of effectively controlling investors through the right of supervision and obliging them under the threat of serious penalties in a swift procedure, the state has failed to enforce these obligations. By doing so, it would have contributed to the achievement of legal order and protected the legal framework.

In cases where a construction facility owned by a single owner, or a large building with twenty, thirty, or more apartments, needs to obtain a use permit—or re-obtain a use permit due to minor deviations in the building's dimensions from the construction permit, or with a temporary construction permit, temporary until the settlement of property relations and the definition of KP for the regular use of the building—together with the geodetic study in order to register the owner's property on the building or part of the building and the land under the building, it is necessary to re-order, pay for, and prepare the documentation and carry out the technical acceptance of the facility again. In these various situations, especially when there are only a few owners in one building, it is difficult to reach an agreement, most often because the preparation of the urban project of the completed works and the geodetic study is costly.

If the building permit was deviated from and a different square footage was built in height, then legalization must be sought, because there is no building permit for that part. Thirdly, in the case of legalization, the legalization of objects often results in a decision on the legalization of the object being obtained. The competent authority can designate construction land under the building as land for regular use. In that case, Article 70, Paragraph 2 of the new Law on Planning and Construction stipulates the obligation of the interested party to initiate the procedure for determining the KP for the regular use of the facility within five years from the legalization decision. If the land is in public ownership, the consent of the Republic Directorate for Property is required.

Fourth, at this point, we make a note regarding the pre-parcellation procedure, which requires a project approved by the competent authority. There is an exception provided by Art. 68 of the Planning and Construction Act (2009) when no pre-planning project is required, but only an elaboration of geodetic works. The mentioned article in the first paragraph reads:

“The correction of the boundaries of neighboring cadastral plots, the merging of neighboring cadastral plots of the same owner, the merging of

neighboring plots where the same person is the owner or long-term tenant based on earlier regulations, as well as the creation of a larger number of building plots according to the planned or existing construction, i.e., the planned or existing purpose of the building plot, is carried out on the basis of geodetic works. "Therefore, in this case, it is necessary to have the consent of all the owners, ensure that the property relations have been resolved, and obtain the consent of the competent attorney if the neighboring plot is public property.

Further in paragraphs 5 and 6:

"The plot owner, after preparing the geodetic work report, submits a request for the correction of the plot boundaries to the authority responsible for the state survey and cadastre.

Along with the request mentioned in paragraph 5 of this article, the owner submits proof of resolved property legal relations."

Fifth: Conversion of Public Property on Construction Land. With the entry into force of the Law on Planning and Construction on September 11, 2009, the right of use ceases and transitions into the right of ownership in favor of the Republic of Serbia, the autonomous province, or the unit of local self-government, without compensation. This provision of the Law was certainly a step forward in its application. However, in some cases, which we will discuss further, this solution led to a legal gap: how to transfer the right of ownership to certain persons who have the right of use, who bought it from the KP state, separated it on the ground, but it was not marked or registered in the cadastre.

It is also prescribed by the same Law on Planning and Construction (2009), Article 102, Paragraphs 1 and 2, that the right of use on construction land is converted into the right of ownership without compensation, and it is acquired on the day this law enters into force. Paragraph three:

"The property right on the cadastral plot is registered in favor of the person who is registered as the owner of the building, that is, the buildings located on that plot, or the person who is registered as the holder of the right of use on the cadastral plot of undeveloped construction land..." with certain exceptions not relevant here.

During the legalization of buildings and the formation of KP, the decision determines the termination of the right of use. Through direct negotiation, the right of ownership is acquired at the market price. However, if the plot was formed before September 11, 2009, the competent authority of the local self-government for property-legal affairs will accept this fact as an acquired right. Consequently, the property right will be registered in the cadastral books in accordance with Article 70 of the Law on Planning and Construction.

The Law on Planning and Construction distinguishes between acquiring ownership of a plot of land that is in public ownership and other forms of ownership. It prescribes a regime for converting the right of use on construction land into public ownership. If a building is constructed on another person's land, based on regulations on property relations, proof of the corresponding right to the building land, a legally binding court judgment, contract, or other legally valid document is required (Act on Legalization of Buildings, 1996, Article 10).

The conversion of the right of use of the parties into the right of ownership of KP in public property is achieved through freight traffic, public advertisement, direct negotiation, and prescribed exceptions.

Alienation of undeveloped construction land in public ownership is carried out by public bidding. However, it can be leased by direct contract in certain cases, provided that a planning document has been adopted on the basis of which location conditions are issued, i.e., a building permit, based on Articles 99 and 100 of the Act on Planning and Construction (2009).

Exceptionally, public construction land can be alienated at a price lower than the market price, or without compensation, under specific circumstances. These circumstances include fulfilling contractual obligations that occurred before the entry into force of this law, the realization of projects for the construction of buildings of importance for the Republic of Serbia, and mutual dispositions between owners in public property, as stated in Article 99, paragraph 12 of the same law.

### **3. One special case of the acquisition of property on KP that involves individuals who have the right to use property that is in public ownership**

One special case of the acquisition of property on KP that is in public ownership involves persons who have the right to use it. For the purposes of this paper, we cite a specific example of the city municipality of Zemun, in the settlements of Busije and Grmovac (cadastral municipality of Ugrinovci) and the settlements of Plavi Horizonti and Altina. Although there are a number of such cases, this example is particularly illustrative. In 1997, based on a public announcement and in accordance with the regulations of the time, this municipality granted the right of use for 99 years with compensation for the construction of residential buildings to a large number of expelled, escaped, or displaced Serbian people from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo and Metochia. This was done through public advertising and the splitting of

several large cadastral parcels. With the aforementioned amendments to the Law on Land Use and Development, the right of ownership of the State of Serbia was registered on that KP. Although the users were given plots of 6 and 7 ares with the sale of the right of use in accordance with the regulations of the time, the compensation for the assigned plots was close to the real market price of the greenhouses in those locations. This situation involves several tens of thousands of users of allocated plots purchased with a real monetary fee, who could not even register the right of use because the property-legal relations on the plots in question between the state and the company in privatization had not been resolved. One such example is the Agricultural Combine Belgrade (PKB).

By dividing the plots and assigning them to the parties, the key points (KPs) formed and marked on the ground were not entered into the cadastral books. They probably intended to address the humanitarian aspect of the project, which aimed to provide shelter for refugees. However, today, over 20,000 rights holders and about 100,000 users are affected in one way or another by its non-resolution.

It is straightforward to comply with the legally binding decision of the state administrative body regarding the right of use on construction land on a separate plot. If the party has fulfilled the obligations outlined in the decision, paid the required fee, and built the residential facility within the time limit determined by the competent authority, the final decision should be adhered to. Our current law does not recognize the sale of the right of use for 99 years while the same person is the owner of the real estate on the plot. Comparative property law does not recognize such a case either. The stated facts should be interpreted most naturally as the sale of the right of use on the plot. With the adoption of the latest Law on Planning and Construction, and especially its latest amendments from 2023, this right of use turns into the party's property right. Article 103 of the Law on Planning and Construction provides for the conversion of the right to lease construction land for at least 50 years, of land in public ownership into private ownership without compensation if the lease has been paid. This provision enables, through a systemic interpretation, the free conversion of the right of use for 99 years into the right of private property in the above case, if it was acquired through freight work and compensation has been paid.

It is possible that the legislator at the end of the 20th century assumed there would be a regulation of building rights in our legal system, but the development went in a different direction.

In the case of the city municipality of Zemun, the parties acquired the right of use and maintenance on a different basis. Specifically, the Act

on Amendments to the Act on Basic Ownership Relations (29/96) deleted Article 29, which stipulated that the right of ownership of things in social property could not be acquired by maintenance. Since the entry into force of the aforementioned amendment on July 4, 1996, ownership rights can also be acquired on land in social, or later state, ownership. Since then, the terms for maintenance have been running. The parties who received the Decision for the use of construction plots since 1997 have acquired the right of ownership by maintenance in accordance with the law. Moreover, the legal deadline for extraordinary maintenance of 20 years has passed. The parties have been in a peaceful and undisturbed state of land since the settlement was obtained in 1997. As the decision was conditional, only those who did not fulfill the condition—who did not pay the compensation or did not start the construction of a residential building to solve their housing issue within the stipulated period—did not start the maintenance period, and it should be interpreted on a case-by-case basis. At the competition, based on Article 21 of the then-valid Act on Construction Land (1979), other persons were given the use of a certain plot of land to solve the housing issue, with the obligation to pay compensation and build a residential building. In this factual situation, the conclusion follows that the right of use is acquired by decision and maintenance and can quite legally be converted into the right of ownership without compensation for persons who have built a residential building.

A potential problem may be the pre-parceling of already parceled plots, but that is a completely different issue that the state can systematically solve within a reasonable time, in accordance with the legal and educational professions and practices in legally regulated countries.

The provisions of the decision of the administrative body on the provision of KP for use can also be interpreted as the provisions of a bilateral freight contract, in which the obligations of the parties, as well as the subject of the contract, are determined. In accordance with the above-mentioned exception in point two of Article 99, paragraph 12 of the Planning Act, the conversion of the right of use of KP into the ownership right of the owner of the building can be done without compensation, since the fee for acquiring the right of use has been paid.

This is because, in the past, this category of citizens addressed the housing issue through their own work and resources, earning them the support of the state without waiting for it to solve their existential problems. Since the right of use has already been paid for, it would be unfair to interpret the situation differently. The state must serve its citizens by addressing their needs, including the issues discussed in this work. In principle, the regulation

of public records, such as cadastral books, which is the state's obligation, is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of the legal order and economic operations.

Throughout this legal situation, the state faced an unjustified dilemma on how to initiate the procedure. It was as if there was a legal gap because municipalities, as holders of property rights, did not take any action, and geodetic organizations claimed that the issue could only be resolved by conducting a geodetic study for all parcels simultaneously. Consequently, individuals could not take any action. Various requests submitted to municipal authorities remained pending.

Starting from our Constitution, in which Article 58 guarantees the peaceful enjoyment of property, as well as the provisions of the Law on Obligations, which state that the seller transfers the right of ownership of the subject of the contract to the buyer, and therefore must create the conditions for the said transfer, the state had a reason to initiate the procedure for the transfer of the right of public ownership to private property of customers.

We can propose, in accordance with the observation of the state as a service for citizens, as a welfare state, in that spirit and obligation of the state, to amend the Law on Planning and Construction in Article 99 by adding paragraphs 14 and 15, which would read:

“The Republic of Serbia, an autonomous province and a local self-government unit, can alienate construction land without compensation when fulfilling contractual obligations. This includes the sale of the right of use on construction land to individuals and legal entities, based on the decision of the administrative body of local self-government made before the entry into force of this law. Additionally, it is based on the decision of the state body to divide large plots of land into smaller cadastral plots to address the housing needs of the population and for other purposes.

The authority responsible for property law affairs within the local self-government is obliged, no later than three years from the date of adoption of these amendments, to make a decision on initiating the procedure for the transfer of property on construction land, as specified in paragraph 14 of this law, in favor of the persons who built the facilities. Based on this decision, the authority must hire a geodetic organization for parceling and subsequently make a decision on the transfer of the first ownership of the construction land and its registration in the cadastral books.”

Based on this authorization, the Decision on Construction Land of the City of Belgrade would be amended, and other local governments would make their own decisions. These decisions would prescribe the procedure for

engaging geodetic offices and organizations in the parcelling of the parcels in question and undertaking all other actions, such as obtaining the consent of the public advocate and others. This would enable the adoption of a decision on the transfer of property rights without compensation to the parties, based on which the entry in the cadastral books would be made.

In addition to the benefits of updating the cadastral books, such as bringing order to property relations on real estate, enabling wider traffic, reviving the market, and other public interests, the economic effect of the proposed changes for the state body should not be ignored. If we analyze that there are approximately 20,000 parties in this position in Belgrade (the exact number is not known) and if the fee for making a decision would be 10,000 dinars with an additional 3-5 thousand dinars for the cost of a surveyor's work, in KP up to 10 ares, and in larger and higher areas, then we easily get the amount of 200,000,000 dinars along with the payment for the service of geometric shops, for the budget of the City of Belgrade. This amounts to almost two million euros. This proposed work of the state would pay for itself and contribute many times over to the state budget, which is all the more reason to accept the proposed changes.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the conversion of the right to use construction land into the right of ownership should be done in accordance with Article 102, paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 of the Law on Planning and Construction. The right of use on construction land is transformed into the right of ownership without compensation on the date of entry into force of this law, specifically the amendment of the law from 2023, in favor of the person who is registered as the owner of the building or who is registered as the holder of the right of use on the KP on undeveloped construction land, based on Article 106, paragraph 1.

In connection with the problem of high costs for parcelling, including pre-parcelling, the preparation of a geodetic study, and the preparation of an urban project of completed works, it is necessary for the state to issue a regulation, decision, or amendment to the Planning Act. This should address situations where there is an initiative by a housing association in building or citizens' associations in connection with the plots. Considering the level of income of employees and pensioners in our country, the state should cover the registration costs for pensioners below a certain pension threshold, as well as for other citizens who have an income below the national average or

the prescribed minimum income. Additionally, the state should perform the administrative work associated with these processes.

For decades, the state did not fully perform its role as a seller until the end of the property acquisition process by buyers, nor did it adequately control the execution of issued building permits according to the construction permit. Now, it must correct that. This would not only establish the principle of legality in the legal system and increase the value of real estate in Belgrade but also contribute to the reduction of undeveloped construction land and derelict buildings in Belgrade and other cities in Serbia. It would lead to better application of building regulations, enhance the legal and general safety of citizens, and ensure the functioning of the legal order.

Finally, it is necessary to conclude that this way of writing legal norms, as seen in the Law on Planning, does not contribute to the spread of the principle of legality. This law had to undergo a series of changes to gain precision and applicability of legal norms. Eugen Huber wrote a draft of the civil laws of Switzerland in 1902 in which the legal norm must be comprehensible and clear, such that it can only have three paragraphs, each containing one sentence (Stanković & Vodinelić, 2007. p. 27). Our Planning Act contains over twenty paragraphs in individual articles and remains unclear on certain issues. It would be even more unclear if there had been no changes and additions in the last ten years. The numerous positions presented do not follow a chronological thread. The positions are neither precise nor clear, nor are they sufficiently synthesized methodologically and methodically. This has led to the writing of numerous extensive positions and references to many previous positions, addressing individual questions partially and without chronological order. As a result, the reader loses the thread of understanding the text.

Construction on construction land is an important fact of the general development of the market economy, and the investor must be clear about his obligations, duties and rights. Otherwise, on the contrary, legal regulation becomes instead of a framework and a guardian of the environment of the market economy and economic operations, a braking factor, which is not its purpose and goal (Tabaroši, 2006, p. 25).

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# **PRETVARANJE PRAVA KORIŠĆENJA NA GRAĐEVINSKOM ZEMLJIŠTU U PRAVO SVOJINE U POZITIVNOM PRAVU REPUBLIKE SRBIJE**

**APSTRAKT:** Predmet rada je analiza stanja u oblasti građanskostvarne materije koja se odnosi na pretvaranje prava korišćenja na građevinskom zemljištu u pravo svojine u pozitivnom pravu Republike Srbije. Radi se o veoma složenom građanskopravnom pitanju koje duži niz godina nije bilo na adekvatan način regulisano u pravnom sistemu Srbije, što je dovelo do pravne nesigurnosti i nerešavanja nekoliko desetina hiljada slučajeva. Primenom istorijske, komparativnopravne i dogmatsko pravne metode, kao i metode analize sadžaja relevantnih pozitivnopravnih dokumenata, u radu su na argumentovani način prezentovane odredbe brojnih zakona, koji na direktni i indirektni način tretiraju ovu pravnu materiju, pre svega, odredbe Zakona o planiranju i izgradnji, Zakona o ozakonjenju objekata, i odredbe drugih zakona. U radu je izneto argumentovano pravno tumačenje odredbi više zakonskih akata koje prevazilazi situaciju nepreciznog propisivanja ove važne građanskopravne stvari i ponuđen predlog rešenja nagomilanih slučajeva pretvaranja prava korišćenja u pravo svojine objekata za stanovanje izgrađenih bez građevinske dozvole i građevinskog zemljišta na kojem su izgrađeni ti objekti, dodeljenog na korišćenje uz naknadu od strane nadležnog državnog upravnog organa lokalne samouprave.

***Ključne reči:*** *pravo korišćenja, pravo svojine, pretvaranje.*

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