

Brief n. 11/ December 2023

Belgrade's EXPO 2027 shining light and shadows

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Con il sostegno di



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo

Belgrade EXPO 2027 is set to be a momentous event for the city of Belgrade and the nation of Serbia. EXPOs are renowned international exhibitions that serve as platforms for countries to showcase innovative ideas and advancements, and foster international cooperation.

Scheduled to take place in the capital city of Serbia, the EXPO 2027, setting the stage for an even more extensive global event – World EXPO 2030, is supposed to shine a spotlight on Serbia's potential as a global player. Its purpose extends beyond showcasing advancements; it seeks to stimulate economic development, foster cultural exchange, and inspire innovation, thus building stronger diplomatic ties. According to the Government of Serbia, Belgrade EXPO 2027 is supposed to attract visitors and participants from around the world, offering a unique opportunity to celebrate Serbia's rich history and modernisation efforts. The Government also sees this event as Serbia's commitment to becoming an integral part of the global community and making a positive impact on the world stage. However, whether this vision will materialise as intended it remains uncertain, given challenges in financial transparency, legal frameworks, and the potential transformation of the old Belgrade Fair complex¹.

This paper delves into the multifaceted aspects surrounding the upcoming Belgrade EXPO 2027, aiming to provide an in-depth analysis of its potential advantages and the underlying challenges that often remain obscured by the optimistic narratives prevalent in the domestic media. The paper explores the historical significance of World EXPOs, the particularities of EXPO 2027, and the economic, cultural, and infrastructural potential that this global event brings to the city and to Serbia. Additionally, it scrutinises the controversial aspects of EXPO 2027, such as the use of a special law, financial implications, and the future of iconic structures like Hall 1 (Hala 1) within the Belgrade Fair complex. By examining these complexities and potential issues, the paper seeks to shed light on the intricate dynamics of hosting an EXPO exhibition, offering recommendations for an approach that maximises the benefits while addressing the challenges, ultimately contributing to the balanced development of Serbia and its strategic positioning in the Western Balkans and the EU integration process.

Rising to the Spotlight: The Dual Perspectives of Hosting an EXPO Exhibition

World EXPOs, with a history dating back to 1851, have consistently proven their ability to make a significant impact on host cities and nations. By promoting cross-cultural exchange and presenting innovative solutions to global challenges, EXPOs leaves lasting legacies of economic growth, technological innovation, and cultural enrichment. These international events have left a permanent mark on some of the world's most iconic cities. For instance, the 1851 EXPO in London presented the groundbreaking Crystal Palace, while the 1889 EXPO transformed Paris with the iconic Eiffel Tower. In more recent times, the 2010 EXPO played a pivotal role in revitalising Shanghai and establishing it as a global metropolis. These are just a few of the many examples of how World EXPOs have reshaped cities and nations. Hence, EXPOs offer a unique opportunity for countries to strengthen their international presence and establish connections that transcend borders and cultures.

¹ The Belgrade Fair complex, also known as "Beogradski Sajem," is a large exhibition venue in Belgrade, Serbia, encompassing various halls and facilities for hosting events, conferences, and exhibitions. Established in 1937, it has played a significant role in the cultural and economic life of the city and the country. The complex includes iconic structures like Hall 1 (Hala 1), which has been a central venue for diverse events and exhibitions for nearly seven decades.

The EXPO exhibition has historically acted as a powerful catalyst for substantial economic growth. These global events provide a unique platform for countries to engage in international collaboration and trade at an unprecedented scale. Participation in EXPOs often leads to the forging of new partnerships and trade agreements, bolstering international trade relationships and attracting foreign investments. Furthermore, EXPOs attract a diverse range of visitors, including tourists, international delegations, and business representatives from around the world. This influx of visitors creates heightened demand for local services, encompassing hotels, restaurants, transportation, and retail establishments. Consequently, it ignites a surge in economic activity, resulting in the generation of new jobs and a substantial increase in revenue for the host city and its businesses.

Even though it is a temporary event, EXPO exhibitions, including the one that will be held in Belgrade in 2027, carry the potential for substantial infrastructure development. The preparation for the exhibition often includes the enhancement of the city infrastructure. Specifically, in Belgrade, many infrastructure projects were already announced². The comprehensive approach encompasses the expansion and improvement of transportation networks, the construction of state-of-the-art exhibition facilities, and the upgrade of accommodation and hospitality services. These infrastructure enhancements should serve a dual purpose: supporting the successful execution of the EXPO while also creating a lasting legacy of improved urban infrastructure and services that the city's residents will benefit in the future. Therefore, the upcoming EXPO 2027 in Belgrade not only promises temporary advancements in infrastructure for the event but also holds the potential to leave a lasting legacy of improved urban infrastructure in the long term.

While the potential for international collaboration and tourism-driven economic growth is evident, it is essential to acknowledge that the path forward may not be without its challenges. Not all events have lived up to their expected outcomes. The history of EXPO events reveals that even well-organized and less corruption-prone countries have faced economic difficulties due to the high costs of organising such events. For instance, the 1974 EXPO held in Spokane, USA, with the goal of revitalising the city centre and attracting tourists, fell short of its anticipated benefits. The EXPO site remained underutilised after the event, and some of the infrastructure deteriorated. Another example is the Seville EXPO 1992, which placed Spain in a precarious economic situation. The 2000 EXPO in Hanover failed to significantly boost urban development, and the transformation and continued use of the EXPO area did not meet expectations. Finally, the anticipated economic benefits of Milan EXPO 2015 did not materialise as expected. These instances underscore the wide variation in the outcomes of EXPOs and highlight the importance of effective planning, sound financial management, and post-event strategies to maximise benefits while minimising risks. Likewise, while Belgrade is expected to prioritise the beautification and revitalisation of neglected areas, it is crucial to recognise that the results may not fully meet the initial expectations.

Looking at EXPO from this comparative historical perspective, the critical question remains whether Belgrade and Serbia will capitalise on this opportunity and navigate the path of hosting EXPO 2027 in a way that truly maximises its potential benefits. Indeed, EXPO 2027 stands as a remarkable platform for cultural exchange, transcending borders to create a vibrant tapestry of diverse traditions and perspectives. This global gathering provides a unique opportunity to

² Euronews: [EXPO 2027 u Beogradu najavljen kao "kvantni skok" za srpsku ekonomiju: Koliko su ostvarivi ambiciozni ciljevi \[EXPO 2027 in Belgrade announced as a 'quantum leap' for the Serbian economy: How achievable are the ambitious goals?\]](#)

celebrate Serbia's rich cultural heritage, offering a stage for the world to appreciate the nation's artistic, historical, and culinary treasures.

For instance, Serbia could host cultural showcases highlighting its renowned medieval monasteries, traditional folk music, and culinary delights like *ajvar* and *rakija*, allowing visitors to savour the essence of Serbian culture. EXPO 2027 goes beyond being a global event; it represents an opportunity to leave an indelible and positive mark on the city of Belgrade and the entire nation of Serbia. This event has the potential to kindle a newfound appreciation for Serbia's cultural wealth and modern vitality, making it an appealing destination for international travellers. These elements can manifest only as long as the organisers account for the potential risks and limitations that have been observed in the past.

Controversies Surrounding EXPO 2027: Unpacking the Debates in Belgrade

While the exact nature and significance of Belgrade EXPO 2027 have remained somewhat shrouded in mystery to the general public, insights from urban planners shed light on its implications. The EXPO 2027 is a specialised exhibition that paves the way for the grand World EXPO 2030, a momentous global event. Despite the inherent brevity and spatial limitations of specialised EXPO exhibitions, confined to 25 hectares, this event promises to be a colossal gathering, drawing a substantial number of visitors. With an estimated daily average attendance of 40,000 people, a stark contrast to the prior daily record of approximately 16,000 visitors at the Belgrade Fair, expectations are high, with over 3.5 million visits anticipated during the three-month-long exhibition³. The chosen theme, "Play for Humanity," encapsulates the pressing global issues and challenges surrounding the future of human development in an ever-evolving digital and technology-based society. This theme underscores the dynamic interplay of playfulness, innovation, and their profound implications for humanity in the modern world. As the veil surrounding Belgrade EXPO 2027 begins to lift, nearly four years before the exhibition takes place, challenges and concerns are already emerging one by one.

The allocation of significant funds for EXPO 2027 and the construction of the National Football Stadium in the 2024 budget has raised questions regarding the financial implications of these projects. According to Transparency Serbia, a substantial budget of RSD 67.8 billion (approximately 578.6 million euros) is planned for EXPO 2027 over the next three years, accompanied by an additional RSD 49 billion (around 418.1 million euros) designated for the construction of the National Football Stadium⁴. Considering the exemptions from land development fees granted to the investor, it is anticipated that the majority of these funds will be channelled towards project implementation. The expansive complex encompassing facilities for EXPO 2027 and the National Stadium spans approximately 167 hectares, including exhibition areas with seven halls ranging from 9,000 to 11,000 square meters⁵. This substantial financial commitment underscores the scale and ambition of these projects and raises important questions about their financial transparency and long-term sustainability.

Another concern arises from the introduction of a law specifically designed for the EXPO 2027 project in Serbia. This special law grants the ability to carry out extensive projects—costing up to one billion euros—without adhering to the standard provisions of the *Public Procurement Law*

³ Oblakoder magazin: [Planira li se rušenje beogradskog sajma? \[Is there a plan to demolish Belgrade fair?\]](#)

⁴ Transparentnost Srbija: [Projekat EXPO 2027 bez javnih nabavki \[Project EXPO 2027 without public procurement\]](#)

⁵ Radio Slobodna Evropa: [Lex specialis za EXPO 2027 i Nacionalni stadion u Srbiji \[Lex specialis for EXPO 2027 and National Stadium in Serbia\]](#)

(PPL). *The Law on Special Procedures for the Implementation of the EXPO Belgrade 2027 exhibition* designates that all procedures essential for the project are deemed urgent. Furthermore, this law entails the establishment of a distinct commercial entity tasked with overseeing the project's execution, alongside the creation of dedicated purpose-specific firms for constructing residential structures within the complex. Hence, all these business entities formed for the project will be exempted from the regulations of the PPL. Consequently, this provision opens the door to conducting procurements for the project outside of the standard procedures and without adherence to the rules of public procurement, an already very sensitive area prone to corruption. Additionally, the special law dictates that land expropriation to meet the project's requirements will be carried out in accordance with its provisions. While this approach, involving the use of "*lex specialis*" law, expedites the realisation of the project, it does raise pertinent questions regarding transparency and the principles of fair competition within the public procurement processes.

While the Serbian government's rationale for introducing this legislation, specifically tailored for EXPO 2027, may have its merits in fast-tracking ambitious projects, previous experiences with special laws have left a cloud of uncertainty. Critics argue that bypassing established procedures could hinder fair competition and potentially inflate costs due to the absence of competitive bidding. They emphasise the importance of adhering to standard regulations to ensure the responsible allocation of public funds and to guard against potential corruption or favouritism. Not so long ago, for the purpose of the construction of the Morava Corridor, a special law was introduced without a clear constitutional basis, which allowed the government to direct the procedure for selecting a strategic partner with whom to enter into an agreement. Considering the negative impact on the public procurement system, which the European Commission had repeatedly pointed out, the Government of Serbia proposed the repeal of this law in 2023⁶. As discussions continue, the impact of this specific legal framework on EXPO 2027 projects and whether its potential advantages outweigh the associated risks and controversies remain uncertain.

The discussion surrounding the relocation of the Belgrade Fair to Surčin, along with the introduction of EXPO 2027, has sparked considerable debate that goes way beyond financial issues. The projections of the expected number of visitors suggest that the current capacities of the existing Belgrade Fair complex are inadequate for the upcoming exhibition, without even considering other aspects such as transportation, municipal services, and infrastructure. Nevertheless, the question arises as to why a potential reconstruction and expansion of the existing Belgrade Fair complex were not seriously considered. Besides the generalised conclusions in the media from city leaders and the city's urban planner, stating that the current Belgrade Fair facilities are insufficient and economically unsustainable due to heating and cooling costs⁷, there has been no comprehensive feasibility study or substantial analysis to unequivocally rule out the possibility of refurbishing and expanding the capacities of the existing complex. These circumstances have led to concerns and questions about the future of the Belgrade Fair complex, its iconic Hall 1, and the relocation of the exhibition to Surčin.

Changing the landscape of the city and taking away one of the symbols of the city might be the thing that concerns Belgradians the most. Concerns have arisen regarding the fate of Hall 1 and

⁶ Biznis.rs: [Predloženo ukidanje zakona o posebnim postupcima kod izgradnje infrastrukture od posebnog značaja \[Proposed repeal of the Law on special procedures for the construction of infrastructure of special importance\]](#)

⁷ Oblakoder magazin: [Planira li se rušenje beogradskog sajma? \[Is there a plan to demolish Belgrade fair?\]](#)

the larger complex following the revelation of plans for the future development of the Belgrade Fair area. With photographic renderings indicating Hall 1 surrounded by high-rise buildings and a large panoramic wheel on the Sava Riverbank, it became evident that the complex is slated for a substantial transformation. Specifically, the removal of all structures within the Belgrade Fair complex, except for Hall 1, which remains in state ownership, marks a significant change in the area's destiny as it transitions entirely into the hands of the Belgrade Waterfront company, linked to the project with the same name. Despite being designated as a protected cultural monument since 2009, Hall 1 remains a vibrant and adaptable space that has hosted crucial events in Belgrade for nearly seven decades. Urbanist Dragomir Ristanović emphasises the importance of understanding that protecting a building does not necessitate its isolation from evolving purposes⁸. In fact, the vast, clear spans characterising the halls at the Belgrade Fair make them highly versatile spaces adaptable to various functions beyond exhibitions. The vague and unspecified description of Hall 1's future function raises concerns, as it seems decision-makers may not have a clear vision for the building.

Navigating Belgrade EXPO 2027 Challenges: Key Recommendations for a Successful Journey

This analysis has brought to light key challenges within the framework of Serbia's approach to organising EXPO 2027. The intricate dynamics involving special law for project implementation and the circumvention of PPL, coupled with the relocation of the Belgrade Fair and the imperative need for comprehensive urban planning, add layers of complexity to the venture. Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates a holistic approach that extends beyond procurement reforms. Serbia must navigate these concerns judiciously, incorporating strategic planning, public engagement, and effective oversight to ensure the success, transparency, and long-term positive impact of EXPO 2027. To address these challenges, Serbia can consider the following steps:

- **Transparency and Accountability:** To address concerns about transparency and accountability, the Serbian government should consider involving independent oversight bodies and civil society organisations in the planning and execution of EXPO 2027. This would help ensure that the projects are carried out with transparency and adhere to established regulations, minimising the risk of corruption and favouritism.
- **Cost-Benefit Analysis:** To assess the financial implications of EXPO 2027 and the associated projects, including the construction of the National Football Stadium, it is crucial to conduct a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis. This analysis should evaluate the long-term sustainability of the investments and their repercussions on the national budget.
- **Infrastructure Improvements:** To ensure the infrastructure project aligns with the city's long-term urban development goals while preparing the EXPO 2027, the officials should focus on the enhancement of city infrastructure, including transportation networks and accommodation facilities, with a view to creating a lasting legacy for Belgrade's residents.
- **Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** To address concerns regarding the preservation and future use of Hall 1 within the Belgrade Fair complex, the city officials should collaborate with urban planners, architects, and heritage preservation experts to explore

⁸ Oblakoder magazin: [Planira li se rušenje beogradskog sajma? \[Is there a plan to demolish Belgrade fair?\]](#)

adaptive reuse options that maintain the cultural and historical significance of this iconic building and its surrounding.

- **Public Consultation:** To ensure citizens' engagement and trust in the project, it is necessary to promote public consultation throughout the planning and execution of EXPO 2027. Solicit input from the local community and stakeholders to ensure that their concerns and expectations are considered in decision-making processes is of great importance.

As the journey toward Belgrade EXPO 2027 unfolds, it becomes evident that strategic planning and vigilant monitoring are imperative not only in the run-up to the event but throughout its execution and in its aftermath. Challenges, though emerging early, present opportunities for proactive solutions. It is within this proactive spirit that Serbia must approach the complexities surrounding EXPO 2027. The city's historical and cultural significance, coupled with its growing importance in regional politics and economics, lays the groundwork for a transformative event. By acknowledging and addressing concerns, from financial transparency to the preservation of cultural heritage, Serbia can navigate these challenges successfully. The vision for EXPO 2027 is not just a global event; it is an opportunity to shape a positive and lasting legacy for Belgrade and Serbia on the world stage.

In the midst of the current complex geopolitical landscape, hosting EXPO 2027 is a pivotal opportunity for Serbia to strengthen both its leadership role in the Western Balkans and its path towards EU integration. This global showcase not only highlights Serbia's cultural richness and economic resilience but also emphasizes its unwavering commitment to international collaboration. By effectively managing and successfully hosting EXPO 2027, Serbia not only reinforces its position as a regional leader but also aligns itself with European Union values. In the current intricate and challenging geopolitical scenario, this dual emphasis on leadership in the region and active steps towards EU integration becomes particularly crucial. Through this international platform, Serbia can actively promote regional cooperation and showcase its dedication to European ideals, contributing significantly to its broader geopolitical objectives.