

Steering Tourism to a Greener Course in Belgrade

Article by Predrag Momčilović

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As the high season approaches, many tourist destinations in Southern Europe are set to miss out on the revenue generated by visitors for another year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Belgrade, a city which has invested heavily in making the city more attractive to tourists in recent years, is likely to feel this economic impact acutely. However, argues Predrag Momčilović, the pandemic also provides a moment to pause the city's socially and economically destructive plans that prioritise tourism over quality of life for residents. The citizens of Belgrade have long been calling for reform - it's time the city listened.

In 2019, Belgrade submitted its first candidacy to become the “European Green Capital” of 2022. This award is given to cities that achieve high environmental standards and demonstrate a strong commitment to sustainable development. As expected, Belgrade did not receive this distinction. The mayor stated that it took Ljubljana 10 years to achieve this recognition and that Belgrade would continue to work on it. However, to become a green capital and boost its candidacy for the award, Belgrade must first resolve the growing social and ecological problems that stem from its expanding tourism sector.

As the capital and largest city of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade is the top tourist destination in the country: almost 50 per cent of the country's tourists in 2019 visited Belgrade. In the same year, Belgrade recorded 258,348 tourist and 2,696,832 overnight stays. From 2010 to 2019, the number of tourists heading for the city more than doubled while the number of overnight stays increased by 140 per cent. The city saw a threefold increase in the number of foreign tourists.

This rapid growth in tourism has changed the urban fabric of Belgrade. However, it is not sufficiently monitored by the city's administration and public policies related to sustainable tourism are almost non-existent. Various strategic documents envisage another doubling of the number of tourists in the next 10 years. The mechanisms by which Belgrade can achieve an increase in the number of tourists and develop sustainable infrastructure not only for tourism but for its entire population are poorly defined.

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected the tourism sector in Belgrade and the number of visits during some months in 2020 was over 90 per cent lower than 2019 levels. However, the pandemic that slowed down tourism has also opened the possibility of thinking about desirable tourism reforms that would enable Belgrade to meet the needs of tourists and the local population in a sustainable way.

In the name of tourism

In the past ten years, the urban structure of Belgrade has undergone significant changes in the name of tourism, despite a backlash and criticism from citizens. Citizens have highlighted their own lack of involvement in decisions around megaprojects and their negative impacts on the environment and cultural heritage. Standing in the shadow of these rapid developments are unplanned construction projects and decades of neglect of the basic city infrastructure.

The ambition to position Belgrade regionally as the tourist capital has prevailed as government representatives repeat the “it will attract tourists” refrain in their response to criticism. When the public reacted turbulently to the felling of trees in mid-2019 and to the construction of the gondola lift, a cable car designed to connect two parts of Belgrade bordered by the Sava river, Mayor Zoran Radojicic said that it represents a “capital project that will contribute to the further development of tourism in Belgrade.”

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In 2014, citizens launched protests against the Belgrade Waterfront project – a project endorsed by the Serbian Progressive Party as part of their election campaign for the Belgrade City Assembly. Despite numerous protests organised by Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own from 2014 to 2017, Belgrade Waterfront has expanded its facilities, towering over the city landscape. The highest planned facility within this megaproject is the Belgrade Tower (with an estimated height of 168 metres) which the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić hopes also hopes will be a draw for tourists.

Fountains, especially musical ones, have become a new obsession for the people who run Belgrade. Such installations are often accompanied by corruption scandals. During the construction of the musical fountain on Slavija, one of the largest squares in Belgrade, Deputy Mayor Goran Vesic repeatedly stated that the fountain is a tourist attraction that will bring in more visitors even though this project has been challenged by citizens as economically unjustified.

While Belgrade lacks basic infrastructure such as wastewater treatment systems, waste management, and more sustainable public transport, the construction of luxury housing, commercial facilities and megalomaniacal projects have been prioritised. These projects are unsustainable not only due to their disruption of nature and high energy consumption but also because they exacerbate social exclusion and bring little value to the local population.

Tourism over the environment

The Draft Tourism Development Strategy of the City of Belgrade 2020 to 2025 makes a commitment to maintain a clean environment. This commitment is, however, not compatible with the goal to improve the city's tourism offer outlined in the same strategy.

Service activities in the sector contribute to additional pollution and waste generation. In Belgrade, this would mean an escalation in problems related to waste management, emissions, and noise pollution, throwing into question the sustainability, ecological and

water footprint of tourism in the city.

Only 70 per cent of the city's territory is covered by sewage disposal systems, and wastewater treatment plants are still in the planning stage, making it one of the largest cities in Europe that does not treat its wastewater. Most wastewater ends up directly in the Sava and Danube, which further reduces the quality of these rivers and affects the drinking water supply to Belgrade. The increase in the amount of waste generated due to the growth of tourism in Belgrade is inevitable, since both in Belgrade and across Serbia the waste management hierarchy is almost non-existent; over 95 per cent of municipal waste ends up in landfills and dumps, while only a small amount of waste is recycled and reused.

Belgrade faces air pollution every winter, at levels which often push the city to the top of world rankings of the most polluted cities. The highest concentration of polluting particles can be found in the centre of the city, where the largest number of tourists stay. High emissions of pollutants into the air endangers the health of both residents and tourists, which might deter potential visitors. A rise in sound and visual pollution also affects the quality of life in the city.

Mobility at a crossroad

Due to its geographical position, Belgrade is an important traffic hub in the region. The city lies at the confluence of two international rivers, and on important network of roads and railways. A close look at traffic trends in the city reveals that it prioritises less sustainable modes of transport, especially those that have higher emissions of greenhouse gases.

Similar to other densely populated cities, Belgrade is becoming visibly oversaturated with motor vehicles in its traffic infrastructure. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 595,788 passenger cars were registered in 2019; an increase from 568,305 registered passenger cars in 2018, and a 12.5 per cent increase from 2017 levels.

Similarly, air traffic has been on the rise. According to an announcement by the French company Vici, which manages the airport, a 9.2 per cent increase in passengers was observed in 2019, compared to the 5.4 per cent increase the previous year.

Overall, public transport use is slightly declining, but it is still the dominant form of mobility. Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, 47.9 per cent of citizens used public city transport; an impressive number, compared to many European cities. The number of passengers using rail transport has also decreased in recent years. Belgrade has lost several lines that connected it with other European cities, forcing tourists heading for the city to use road or air transport which further reduces the sustainability of tourism in Belgrade.

When visiting a city, tourists generally use the most dominant mode of transport and therefore we need greater investment in the public transport system, with the development of modern mobility infrastructure to facilitate walking, as well as the use of low-carbon transport such as bicycles.

A city for whom?

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Serbia, like other

former members, abandoned the idea of housing as a right guaranteed by the state and, through the mass privatisation of housing stock, switched to a market-oriented model of meeting this need. Publicly owned apartments today make up less than 1 per cent of the total housing stock, while about 98 per cent of apartments are privately owned. The share of non-profit construction is negligible, and alternative non-profit housing models, such as housing cooperatives, do not exist.

According to official statistics, most tourists who visit Belgrade stay in hotels, more than all other types of accommodation combined. This is followed by garni hotels (bed & breakfasts), hostels, private accommodations and other types of accommodation in smaller numbers. However, it is worth noting that these statistics do not take into account the large number of unregistered private accommodations and that, in reality, the number of those who find accommodation on sites like AirBnB is far higher.

Landlords are increasingly opting for short-term rental of apartments, especially those that are close to the city centre

Renting apartments through different platforms is rarely accounted for in official statistics because they make up a great part of the “gray zone” of tourist accommodation. Like many European capitals, landlords are increasingly opting for short-term rental of apartments, especially those that are close to the city centre, because it brings them higher profits and fewer obligations. If we take into account that hundreds of thousands of tenants live in Belgrade (there is no precise data due to non-recording of leases), it is clear that this trend raises rent prices and pushes tenants (mostly students and workers) to the outskirts of the city.

The chaotic development of housing and the lack of housing policies that encourage the security of exercising occupancy rights are compounded by the lack of waste management infrastructure and energy inefficiency. If we add to this the social segregation that results from the construction of luxury apartment blocks, condominiums, and the process of gentrification of the central parts of the city, it is clear that tourism development policies can only further deepen existing social divisions.

Serbia's pandemic hotspot

The pandemic put a hard stop to tourism in the city. The number of tourists in April 2020 decreased by 98.8 per cent compared to the number of tourists in April 2019. In May 2020, the number of tourists decreased by 95.7 per cent compared to May 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic particularly affected the number of foreign tourists which, due to the closure of state borders and prevention measures, was reduced to almost zero. After the mitigation of measures to fight the Covid-19 virus, an increase in the number of domestic tourists at the level of Serbia was noticed, but that recovery hardly affected Belgrade, which is the main pandemic hotspot in Serbia.

The reduction in the number of tourists during 2020 and the beginning of 2021 has made jobs in the tourism and hospitality industries even more precarious and led to job losses. At

the same time, there is growing pressure on the tourism sector to open for business as soon as possible which, if successful, could mean an unplanned increase in the number of tourists in Belgrade. The almost complete extinction and uncertainty that has arisen in the tourism and hospitality sectors at the global, European, national and local levels has left room for reflection on how to make the tourism sector more sustainable and carbon-neutral after the Covid-19 virus pandemic.

A ticket for reform

This text, as well as the research it was based on – “Obstacles on the way to sustainable tourism in Belgrade” – represent only the initial phase in considering the topic of sustainability and carbon neutrality of tourism in Belgrade.

A major obstacle to obtaining accurate information on the sustainability of tourism is the lack of data related to this field, as well as the fact that the relevant strategic documents do not fully cover this domain. Therefore, it is necessary to urgently improve the methodology of data collection and to include the sustainability of tourism in the future strategic and planning documents yet to be adopted. And all documents that have been adopted or due to be adopted should reflect the experiences of citizens, and not represent a dead letter that is far from reality.

The tourism sector is one of those most affected by measures introduced to combat the global Covid-19 pandemic. The closure of borders, reduced mobility of citizens within the country, as well as restrictions on bars, hotels, and restaurants have led to a significant reduction in the number of tourists to Belgrade. This situation should not be seen as negative, but rather an opportunity for tourism to become less carbon and resource-intensive, and more sustainable overall. In order to become a city with sustainable tourism, Belgrade must, above all, become a sustainable city for its permanent residents, which means that it is necessary to solve numerous socio-economic-environmental problems in order to bring the city closer to carbon neutrality.



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