

Call for clarification and Call for action concerning Human Rights Due Diligence and United Nations Participation in EXPO 2027 Belgrade

To:

H.E. António Guterres

Secretary-General of the United Nations United Nations Headquarters
405 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017, United States
E-mail: antonio.guterres@un.org

H.E. Volker Türk

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
E-mail: volker.turk@un.org

Cc:

Mr Robert McCorquodale

Member, Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
E-mail: hrc-wg-business@un.org

Mr Maher Nasser

Commissioner-General, United Nations Pavilion at EXPO 2027 Belgrade Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications
United Nations Headquarters
New York, NY 10017, United States
E-mail: nasser@un.org

Ms Matilde Mordt

Deputy Commissioner-General, United Nations Pavilion at EXPO 2027 Belgrade United Nations Resident Coordinator in Serbia
Resident Coordinator Office, United Nations in Serbia Belgrade, Serbia
E-mail: matilde.mordt@un.org

Dear Secretary-General António Guterres,

Dear High Commissioner Volker Türk,

We are writing on behalf of several civic groups of Serbian citizens living abroad to share our major concerns regarding the human rights due diligence undertaken by the United Nations in connection with its participation in EXPO 2027 Belgrade, and to respectfully submit this call for clarification and action.

First and foremost, we ask you to consider this initiative not only as an expression of our solicitude for our homeland, but also as testimony to our genuine commitment to the values the UN stands for, and our legitimate concern regarding the consistency of UN engagement in EXPO 2027 with the Organisation's own human rights standards.

Our queries arise from the findings issued by the **UN Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises** following its visit to Serbia in October 2025 (hereinafter, the "UN Working Group" or "UN Working Group Report").

We refer to the United Nations' decision to establish an official presence at EXPO 2027 and to the appointment of Mr. Maher Nasser as Commissioner-General and Ms. Matilde Mordt as Deputy Commissioner-General of the UN Pavilion, announced by the Secretary-General on 24 April 2026.¹ We recognise the value of UN engagement with Serbia and the opportunity EXPO 2027 may offer to promote multilateral cooperation and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Our concern is not with UN engagement with Serbia as such, but with how the human rights risks associated with participation were assessed and addressed, particularly in light of findings by a UN Human Rights Council mechanism concerning the legal framework governing EXPO 2027.

The Working Group on Business and Human Rights examined the EXPO 2027 framework and, in **recommendation 119(i)**, called on Serbia to withdraw or amend the special legal framework governing the project. The UN has nevertheless decided to participate in EXPO 2027.

We therefore ask how this decision was assessed against the Working Group's findings and recommendations, and how the UN has ensured that its participation is consistent with its own human rights standards and responsibilities.

Against this background, we would like to draw your attention to the following:

1. Broader Socio-Political Context

The issues surrounding EXPO 2027 cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider context in which the project is being developed.

On 1 November 2024, a canopy collapse at the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station resulted in 16 fatalities.⁴ This tragedy sparked nationwide protests, led by students demanding institutional accountability and transparency. The state's response has subsequently been the subject of serious concern from United Nations independent human rights experts.

1.1. Governance, Corruption, and Public Safety Concerns

The European Parliament has expressly addressed EXPO 2027 in the same resolution concerning the Novi Sad tragedy and broader governance concerns. Its October 2025 resolution urged participating governments and organisations to take into consideration "serious concerns and evidence of widespread corruption linked to the ruling authorities, as well as the reported lack of compliance with basic construction standards and legal requirements in the organisation and construction of the exhibition".⁵

Does the UN's decision to participate depend on safety certifications or inspections provided solely by Serbian state authorities or the EXPO organising committee, or has the UN sought independent third-party verification, consistent with the due diligence standards it emphasises in partnerships under the UN Global Compact or UNDP SDG-partnership criteria?

1.2. Pressure on Protesters and the Academic Community

The Serbian government has responded to the large-scale and sustained protests following the tragedy in Novi Sad with retaliatory measures, intimidation, and violence directed at civil society, including students, journalists, members of the academic community, artists, and cultural workers.

UN human rights experts stated in an August 2025 press release that "What we are witnessing in Serbia is a systematic attempt to silence critical voices and dismantle the independence of academic institutions."⁶ The experts also documented that students and university professors had been "targeted in coordinated smear campaigns" and reported instances of "excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and prolonged detentions." These concerns have become even more pressing in light of the High Commissioner's June 2026 assessment that "the human rights situation is deteriorating" in Serbia.⁷

Has the UN taken into account the potential reputational implications of its participation in EXPO 2027, while its own human rights mechanisms are actively documenting serious human rights concerns in the host country?

2. EXPO Legal Framework

The special legal framework adopted by Serbian authorities for EXPO 2027 ("Lex Specialis") introduces significant exemptions from the Law on Public Procurement and from certain provisions of other regulations concerning, *inter alia*, expropriation, urban planning, construction safety, and environmental protection.¹ The Working Group further reported that the framework permits EXPO-related contracts valued up to EUR 1 billion to be awarded without competitive bidding and noted the absence of an independent oversight mechanism for EXPO 2027.

The Working Group stated it was "alarmed to learn that, in November 2024, the parliament enacted a special legal framework introducing exemptions to the Law on Public Procurement and certain provisions of other regulations," and recommended that Serbia "withdraw or amend the special legal framework and

restore existing safeguards”.² The Working Group also documented significant labour risks affecting migrant workers in the context of EXPO preparations.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights place human rights due diligence, prevention, and the responsible use of leverage at the centre of responses to business-related human rights risks. As the institution under whose auspices these Principles were developed and endorsed, the United Nations is uniquely positioned to model their application. In light of the United Nations’ role in promoting these Principles, **we seek clarification as to how comparable human-rights considerations were incorporated into its decision to participate in EXPO 2027.**

This is reinforced by UN system-wide policies and guidance **emphasising** the importance of assessing human-rights, integrity, and reputational risks in partnerships and other engagements with the business sector. Relevant UN guidance also **emphasises** the importance of assessing human-rights risks associated with participation in major events.

Therefore, the question is what human-rights, environmental, and procurement due-diligence considerations were applied to the UN’s own participation in EXPO 2027. Taking into account that the Working Group met with the Resident Coordinator and members of the UN Country Team during its October 2025 visit, **what mechanism ensured that the Working Group’s findings were communicated to and considered by those responsible for deciding on United Nations participation in EXPO 2027?**

What circumstances or findings would trigger a formal review or reconsideration of the United Nations’ continued participation in EXPO 2027 under the applicable due-diligence framework, and has the EXPO 2027 engagement been reassessed in light of the findings set out in A/HRC/62/36/Add.1?

3. Call for Action – Enhancing Safeguards and Undertaking Concrete Steps

We urge the United Nations and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to:

- Use the United Nations’ engagement with the Serbian authorities to encourage implementation of the Working Group’s recommendation to restore applicable legal safeguards;
- Commission an independent risk assessment associated with EXPO-related activities, particularly those affecting human rights and the environment;
- **Urge** the organisers to address identified environmental risks, including those affecting water resources such as Surčin polje, and to **reconsider projects raising significant animal-welfare and environmental concerns (such as the proposed dolphinarium)** in favour of sustainable alternatives that minimise environmental impacts while delivering lasting benefits to local communities;
- Use UN participation to promote dialogue and higher ethical, social, and environmental standards consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The detailed factual basis for these concerns, including the Working Group’s findings and additional environmental, labour, and human-rights issues identified by the cited sources, is set out in **Annex I**.

We would be grateful if you could respond to the questions raised above, particularly in light of the Working Group’s findings. Considering the time-sensitivity of the matter (less than nine months until the launch of EXPO 2027), **we would appreciate a substantive written response addressing these questions preferably by 15 October 2026.**

We trust that the United Nations will consider this request in the spirit in which it is made: as a serious, good-faith request for transparency, accountability, and institutional coherence.

We intend to publish this correspondence and any substantive response received in full, subject to any applicable confidentiality, data protection, or other legitimate restrictions, in English and Serbian, and to make the material available to relevant United Nations human-rights mechanisms - including the Working Group on Business and Human Rights, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Human Rights Council - and to other institutions concerned with the human-rights implications of EXPO 2027.

We remain at your disposal to discuss this matter further, answer any questions, or provide additional documentation you may require.

Yours sincerely,

The undersigned informal civic groups of Serbian citizens living abroad

USA

Boston uz studente (@boston_uz_studente), Boston, USA
Njujork je uz studente (@nycstandswithstudentsinserbia), New York, USA
Majami uz Studente (@majamiuzstudente), Miami, USA
SF Bay Area uz studente (@sf.bay.area.uz.studente), San Francisco Bay Area, USA
Nantucket uz studente (@ackpodrskastudentima), Nantucket, USA
Austin for students (@austin.uz.studente), Austin, USA
Srpska zajednica u Hjustonu (@hjuston.uz.studente) Houston, USA
LA podrška studentima (@lapodrkastudentima) Los Angeles, USA
Phoenix Podrška studentima (@phoenixuzstudente), Phoenix, USA
Podrška studentima - Čikago (@podrska_studentima_chicago), Chicago, USA
Sijelt uz studente (@sijetl_uz_studente), Seattle, USA
Vašington uz studente (@washingtondc.uz.studente), Washington DC, USA

Canada

1152 Toronto (@1152toronto), Toronto, Canada
Vankuver je uz studente (@vankuver.je.uz.studente), Vancouver, Canada
Edmonton uz studente (@edmonton_uz_studente), Edmonton, Canada
Montreal uz Studente (@montreal_with_students), Montreal, Canada

Europe

Podrška Lozana Ženeva (@podrska.lozana.zeneva), Geneva and Lausanne, Switzerland
Švajcarska uz studente (@1152.svajcarska), Basel, Bern, Luzern, Zurich, Switzerland
UK uz Studente (@uk_uz_studente), London, United Kingdom
Palac gore Brisel (@palac_gore_brisel), Brussels, Belgium
Blokada Beč (@blokada.bec), Vienna, Austria
11:52 Paris (@1152paris), Paris, France 11:52
Atina (@1152atina), Athens, Greece
Španija uz studente (@1152_spain), Spain
Budimpešta uz studente (@budimpesta.uz.studente), Budapest, Hungary
Berlin uz studente (@berlinstandswithstudents), Berlin, Germany
Frankfurt za studente (@frankfurt_za_studente), Frankfurt am Main, Germany
Studenti NRW (Düsseldorf) (@studenti_nrw), Düsseldorf, Germany
Ulm je uz studente (@ulm.je.uz.studente), Ulm, Germany
Hamburg je uz studente (@hamburg.je.uz.studente), Hamburg, Germany

Footnotes

1. United Nations Human Rights Council, Visit to Serbia: Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, A/HRC/62/36/Add.1, paras. 17 and 119(i). UN Digital Library — A/HRC/62/36/Add.1: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4114515>
2. *Ibid.*, paras. 74–79.
3. United Nations Secretary-General, “Noon Briefing of 24 April 2026,” 24 April 2026. Announcement of Maher Nasser and Matilde Mordt appointments. UN Secretary-General — Noon Briefing, 24 April 2026: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2026-04-24.html>

4. United Nations Human Rights Council, *Visit to Serbia: Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises*, A/HRC/62/36/Add.1, para.

5. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4114515>

5. European Parliament resolution of 22 October 2025 on the polarisation and increased repression in Serbia, one year after the Novi Sad tragedy (2025/2917(RSP)), point

31. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0248_EN.html

6. United Nations human rights experts, statement concerning the situation of academic freedom, university autonomy and the rights of students and academic staff in Serbia, August 2025. The experts referred, inter alia, to coordinated smear campaigns targeting students and university professors, excessive force, arbitrary arrests and prolonged detentions.

<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TmSearch/RelCom?code=SRB+6%2F2025>

7. Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Global Update to the Human Rights Council”, 15 June 2026. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2026/06/turk-says-ultimate-trajectory-human-rights-larger-freedom>