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Dr Mechtild Rössler

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**The Voice of
Cultural Heritage
in Europe**

**La Voix du
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en Europe**

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**Subject: Serious Objections to the Cable-car project at Belgrade Fortress,
a site on Serbia's Tentative List**

Dear Madam Director, Dear Mechtild,

Following the decision of the Europa Nostra Board at its meeting held on 26 March in Vienna, we wish to draw your personal attention, and the attention of the World Heritage authorities, to a controversial cable-car project planned at the site of the Belgrade Fortress, a site on Serbia's Tentative List, submitted as a cultural property in 2015 as part of the serial site Frontiers of the Roman Empire.

Description of the site

The Belgrade Fortress, known as Kalemegdan, is one of the most important cultural monuments of the Republic of Serbia. According to the Tentative List description, the site was of high importance for the defense of the Roman Empire after it established its frontier on the Danube in the 1st century AD. A military camp was located in the Upper Town area and in a section of Kalemegdan park, with the walled enclosure covering an area of 20 ha. In addition to this main hilltop fort, the riverside was defended by another two ramparts running down the Danube facing slope. Singidunum (the Roman name for Belgrade) as the frontier stronghold reached its peak in the 2nd and the 3rd centuries. Besides important Roman layers, the site of the fortress bears witness to the presence of humans since the Neolithic Period, with important Celtic layers, Byzantine, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Serbian Middle Age Presence, as well as the presence of Ottoman Empire and Habsburg Empire.



In addition, the site has an exceptional geographical position and offers a viewpoint of unique esthetical value, with the Fortress on the hilltop overlooking the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers. The remarkable view includes the Great War Island on the Danube, an uninhabited wildlife zone and natural fish spawning area, protected since 2005 as an outstanding landscape. The Fortress is adjacent to the historical centre of the city of Belgrade and faces the locality of New Belgrade across the Sava River. The Kalemegdan Fortress is a protected landmark and cultural property of exceptional importance and highest level of protection for Republic of Serbia.



Potential nomination for inscription on the World Heritage List

The site is on Serbia's Tentative List, submitted as a cultural property in 2015 as part of the serial site "Frontiers of the Roman Empire" (FRE), along with a number of other components of FRE in Serbia. As concerns a potential future nomination to the World Heritage List, it is an important opportunity that Serbia's segment of FRE, together with those from Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, be presented as part of the transnational site of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire, together with segments from other countries (United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Hungary and Slovakia) which are currently inscribed as World Heritage or are yet to be discussed by the World Heritage Committee. The integrity of this site is therefore of utmost importance and the responsibility of the State Party to the World Heritage Convention even higher.

The cable-car project

In 2018, the Belgrade City authorities launched a project to build a cable car (gondola lift) over the Sava River connecting the Belgrade Fortress with the opposite bank of the river, the site of the so-called "Friendship Park", which enjoys preliminary protection as a historic urban area. The cable-car line would be some 950 m long, standing on 6 high concrete pillars, have a difference in elevation of 31 m, and a travel time of 3-5 minutes. Twenty-five luxuriously equipped cabins are planned to carry up to 3000 persons per hour.

One side of the cable car system would be built into the very walls of the Fortress. It is to be noted that the Kalemegdan Fortress is built on top of numerous historical levels, with a wealth of archaeological remaining underneath the area, dating from Prehistory.

The cable car is intended purely as an attraction for tourists; there is no long-term justification from any other point of view, be it the organization of city traffic or any hypothetical economic benefits. Moreover, even the tourism benefits are not clear and justified by any study – and voices from tourism sector argue that gondola in the very center of Belgrade undermines the investment in much needed tourism infrastructure in less developed parts of Serbia.

The city authorities launched a tender for interested companies on 13 November 2018 and only three weeks later, on 6 December 2018, the decision to award the contract to a group of four companies was published. According to the plans, the cable car line should be ready for launch by the end of 2019.

It must be noted that, even though the building permit has not yet been ensured, preparatory works for the cable-car line have already begun: as of mid-March, a large number of trees were already chopped down in the areas concerned by the project on both banks of the Sava. A total of some 150 trees is planned to be felled.

Finally, the envisaged cost of the project is a minimum of 18 million Euros, to be covered through the budget of the city of Belgrade and the Republic of Serbia, i.e. the taxpayers' money. Needless to say that such a cable-car line is far from being a priority in the current life of Serbia's capital, where hospitals, schools and vital city infrastructure, including the central train and bus station, are in dire need of urgent improvement.



The threats

Serbia, as a State Party to the World Heritage Convention, invested important resources and professional expertise into the preparation of the Tentative List. Furthermore, the work on the Nomination by the Serbian team was financially supported by the EU and other international donors. With a potential inscription on the World Heritage List, the site would not only ensure international visibility and a high quality cultural tourism potential but, even more importantly, it would provide for an additional opportunity for professional protection in accordance with the highest standards of the conservation practice, as well as for sustainable benefits for the local communities at all the localities within this Tentative List site.

However, should the construction of the cable-car system be completed, the visual integrity of the Belgrade Fortress and surrounding park area would be permanently damaged and the state of preservation of the site at the time of its proposal to the Tentative List would be lost. Such a development would lastingly jeopardize the possibility of achieving this important international recognition and ensuring its subsequent benefits.

Any intervention of this type would mean irreversible and irreparable loss for present and future citizens of Belgrade, Serbia, Europe and the world. Furthermore, such unjustifiable destruction of a heritage site of highest importance would put at question the capacity and will of Serbia to care for a series of other sites it plans to nominate to the WHL – the historic cultural landscape of Bač with Bač Fortress; as well as other fortresses and sites on the Tentative List.

Large mobilisation of expert and civil society organisations

Numerous voices have been raised by expert and civil society organisations against this project, implying that the necessary consultations with heritage stakeholders and the inhabitants of Belgrade for this planned development have not taken place.

A petition has been launched, upon the initiative of Europa Nostra Serbia, by a large number of authoritative organizations, such as Serbia's Society of Conservators, Serbia's Society of Archaeologists, ICOMOS Serbia, ICOM Serbia, and the University of Arts Belgrade, the Departments of Archaeology and Art History at the Faculty of Philosophy, Academy of Architecture, among other, as well as by reputable individuals of Serbia's public, academic and cultural life. Never before has the professional and academic community that deals with heritage issues in Serbia been so united and vocal in its action against an investment project.

Until today this petition has assembled more than 14.000 signatures of support. This petition now exists also in the English language and Europa Nostra will disseminate it across our large European and international network urging other experts and citizens to express their solidarity and support by joining this important heritage campaign. As already indicated, at its meeting held in Vienna on 26 March, the Europa Nostra Board decided to express its solidarity and full support to this important campaign initiated by our country representation in Serbia, among others, by organising a visit of a high-delegation to Belgrade at the beginning of May.

For the **text of the petition and the list of signatories**, please visit the following link https://www.petitions.net/petition_against_the_cable_car_and_destruction_of_the_belgrade_fortress

Please also note that Europa Nostra Serbia and other heritage organisations from Serbia organised a **press conference** on 27 March at which they presented to the media their joint letters addressed to

- 1) the Minister of Culture and Information, Mr Vladan Vukosavljević;
- 2) the Minister of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure Ms Zorana Mihajlović;
- 3) Serbia's National Commission for UNESCO and
- 4) the Institute for the Monuments Protection of the Republic of Serbia.

In these letters, heritage associations analysed the documents and acts that enable the construction of a cable car, arguing that the measures and decisions made during the process violate the legal requirements and professional standards for heritage protection and urban planning. The copy of the original letter (and its English translation) to the Minister of Culture is enclosed for your full information. Other three letters have a similar content and are available upon your request.

In the meantime, we have been informed that the National Commission for UNESCO has invited the signatories of the above-mentioned letter for a meeting on Monday, 8 April which is hopefully an encouraging sign and perspective.

Moreover, the civil society initiative group “Ne Davimo Beograd” (“Let’s not drown Belgrade”) which gathers organisations and individuals interested in urban and cultural policies of the Serbian capital and its sustainable development, submitted an initiative to the Constitutional Court for assessing the constitutionality and legality of the detailed regulation plan by which the Assembly of the city of Belgrade decided to enable the construction of the cable-car line. In the meantime, the “Regulatory Institute for Renewable Energy” (Regulatorni Institut za obnovljivu energiju) issued yesterday a statement seriously questioning the legality of this action and insisted that such actions must be stopped until further examination of the legality of the proposed cable-car project.

Besides obvious questions upon the legality of the process and the project itself, it remains questionable to which extent the authorities responsible for heritage protection and urban policy at the city, as well at the national level, were making their decisions to give permissions to this project in an autonomous, independent and professional manner. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether Serbia’s National Commission for UNESCO and the National Commission for Heritage Protection have been consulted by the Mayor and his office and the required approvals for the project ensured.

Urgent Appeal for UNESCO advice and support

With this letter, we appeal to UNESCO to urgently launch the necessary steps and help preserve the Belgrade Fortress Tentative List property in its entirety, including the archaeological layers and visual integrity of the site. This historical and cultural site of key importance for understanding the various civilizations and different layers of long and rich history of the region must be protected from inappropriate and harmful developments derived from shortsighted investment projects with no cultural value.

We extend in advance our most sincere gratitude for your invaluable advice and assistance on this serious case of endangered heritage of relevance to UNESCO.

Yours sincerely,



Sneška Quaedvlieg-Mihailović
Secretary General



Hermann Parzinger
Executive President

Copies:

Mr Alessandro Balsamo

Chief of Nomination Unit, UNESCO World Heritage Centre

Prof. Dr Goran Milašinović

Serbian National Commission for UNESCO

H.E Ms Tamara Rastovac Siamashvili

Permanent Delegate of the Republic of Serbia to UNESCO

Relevant media sources:

<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a469891/Ne-davimo-Beograd-podneo-inicijativu-za-ocenu-ustavnosti-izgradnje-gondole.html>

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/strucnjaci-projekat-beogradske-gondole-protivzakonit/>

<https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/zaustavite-narusavanje-istorijskog-urbanog-pejzaza-beograda/>

<https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/izgradnja-gondole-i-unesco/>

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/412224/Uskoro-izgradnja-gondole-od-Kalemegdana-do-Uscu>

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/425200/Radojicic-o-gondoli-i-seci-drveca-Ne-treba-sumnjati-u-struku>

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/425000/Sadnja-novih-stabala-i-odbrana-tvrđave>

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/nastavljeni-radovi-na-kalemegdanu-sta-kazu-gradjani-foto-video/>

<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/beograd.74.html:782667-Gondola-sece-stabla-i-rusi-po-Kalemegdanu>

<https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/regulatorni-institut-za-obnovljivu-energiju-nezakonitosti-u-seci-stabala-zbog-gradnje-gondole/>

Sources of Images of the project:

<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/voznja-12-metara-iznad-save-pogledajte-kako-ce-vec-krajem-2019-izgledati-beogradska/e9qt54m?image=7>

<https://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=2154624>