

South Eastern Europe: A region on the rise

Berislav Čižmek, CEO of Zagreb-based specialist management consultancy CBBS, highlights a region on the rise for exhibitions and events

The event and exhibition industry in South Eastern Europe (SEE) stands on strong foundations of nearly a century of tradition and top professionalism. As UFI (The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry) celebrates in 2025 its 100th anniversary, it is important to remember that trade fair companies from Zagreb (Croatia) and Ljubljana (Slovenia) were among the founding members of the association in 1925.

Throughout decades marked by political transitions, economic cycles, and structural changes, the region has maintained a reputation for high-quality, content-driven B2C and B2B exhibitions, trade fairs, conferences and congresses. Its organisers are known for their high professional standards, resilience and ability to adapt – qualities that helped the region's



event industry recover faster after the pandemic compared to many other European regions.

The combination of tradition and new momentum positions the SEE region as a dynamic and strategically relevant player in the broader

European event industry landscape. Notably, EU member states such as Croatia and Slovenia benefit from economic stability, GDP growth above the EU average, and Croatia's entry into the eurozone and Schengen since 1 January, 2023 has stimulated business travel, event participation and foreign investment.

At the same time, the ongoing EU accession trajectory of the Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – is enhancing regional connectivity, regulatory alignment and investor confidence. This creates a wider, integrated SEE marketplace that is becoming more attractive to the local and international organisers, exhibitors and trade visitors.

Events across South Eastern Europe increasingly align with strategic development pillars such as infrastructure, energy, tourism, agriculture, transport, ecology and technology – reflecting the region's transformation into a hub where sustainable development, digitalisation and European integration intersect.

The active participation of leading regional and EU-based companies from construction, renewable energy, agriculture, transport and logistics, hospitality, finance and tourism sector also highlights growing private sector confidence in the region's stability and future EU integration.

The region has earned a reputation for hosting high-quality, content-driven B2B exhibitions, trade fairs, congresses and business events that consistently attract domestic and international participants.

Most of the global event industry trends are reflected in South Eastern Europe as well, and I would highlight the following:

- Sustainability and digitalisation of the event industry is becoming a core standard, with Croatia and Slovenia leading ESG and digital integration
- Expansion of specialised B2B events



Left:
Expo Albania
render
(architects
Steven Holl)

in high-growth sectors such as tourism, ICT, energy, agriculture, transport and logistics

- The region is also facing a shortage of skilled event-production and technical talent requiring new training initiatives for future skilled event professionals
- Growing interest for F2F events, conferences and festivals, as experience-centric and interactive events are becoming of particular interest for younger audiences
- Rising internationalisation, with exhibitors from Western Europe, Turkey, the Middle East and Asia (in particular from PR of China and India) entering SEE markets.

The most important trend that will influence faster development of the event industry in South Eastern Europe is investment in the exhibition and event industry infrastructure. The next 3–5 years, I expect, will be transformational and several major projects are already reshaping the regional landscape.

In Croatia there is planned investment in the New Congress Centre Zagreb: A €51m investment planned at the Zagreb Fair grounds, including a 2,500-seat main hall, to be opened in 2029.

A large development is taking shape in the capital of Serbia, in Belgrade, that will be the host of the EXPO 2027. That event will be held under the theme 'Play for Humanity: Sport and Music for All', and will run 15 May – 15 August, 2027. This global event will explore how play, sport, and music can inspire creativity, innovation and collaboration to address global challenges. Organisers are expecting over four million people and 120 countries to participate in a programme of interactive experiences, live performances, and dialogue. The EXPO 2027 infrastructure in Belgrade will be used after the event as a new location of Belgrade Fair.

In Albania, a fast developing EU candidate country, there are plans for constructing an Expo Albania venue in



Tirana. This will be a new 17,000sqm exhibition and event complex and form part of the 'Albania 2030' development vision.

Steven Holl, Architects and artist Agnieszka Kurant were selected via an Expo Albania international competition. Kurant impressed with her 'End of Signature' project to collect signatures from local Tirana communities and fuse them into a single 'collective signature' which will form a wandering line traversing the rectangular volumes of the new expo centre. The line, produced as a continually transforming computer-animated LED light sign, will shape the CLT roof trusses in a dancing rhythm.

The project aspires to the highest ecological standards with geothermal heating and cooling and state of the art white solar shingles to harness all electricity. A large reflecting pool of recycled rainwater and graywater will shape the public space, while the expo park will reuse excavated earth to create mounds as acoustic buffers in rewilding landscape.

Albania's 3,000-year-old wine culture will also be celebrated in the adjacent wine hotel.

When awarding the design contact, members of the awarding jury noted: "Art becomes architecture... we're certain that Albanians will grow fond of this building quite quickly." And prime minister Edi Rama also said during the presentations that the proposed project showed, "great things can be done."

Above:
Plans are advanced for EXPO 2027 in Belgrade

The full winning design team comprises Steven Holl Architects, Agnieszka Kurant, Atelier 4, Atelier Markgraph, Stoss, and Arup.

South Eastern Europe is entering a new era as one of Europe's most promising MICE and exhibition growth zones. Its strategic advantages, heritage, professional know-how, rising investments, EU integration processes and strong B2B market potential are reshaping it into a highly competitive regional hub.

Luel Muhametaj, general manager of Klik Ekspo Group in Tirana also reflected on importance of the event industry for the region: "The event industry is no longer just a national asset; it is a strategic engine for the entire South Eastern European region as it moves closer to the European Union. Through platforms such as the Tirana International Fair, we are creating a unified space where Albania and its neighbours showcase innovation, attract investment, and shape the economic future of Europe's fastest-rising region."

For venues, organisers, investors and event service providers, the coming years represent a unique window of opportunity: a moment to secure positioning, build partnerships and leverage the SEE region's shift toward sustainable, hybrid, technology-enabled business events.

The industry can look forward to future growth of the SEE event industry which stands ready to strengthen its role on the European and global stage. **EW**

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