

Insights from Belgrade!

May 12-15
2026

UNP+ Urban Nature Exchange
insights and key learnings



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UNPplus is funded by the European Union (Grant Agreement No. 101135386). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor REA can be held responsible for them.

The UNE in short

From 12–15 May 2025, the fourth in-person Urban Nature Exchange took place in Belgrade, bringing together city representatives, researchers, and partners to explore the integration of biodiversity, communication, financing, and resilience into Urban Nature Plans (UNPs). Across four days, participants engaged in workshops and discussions on communication, resilience, justice, citizen science, scenario building, and participatory governance while exploring the territorial complexity of Belgrade through its riverfronts, urban planning strategy, and continuously transforming urban fabric.

The UNE also provided an important opportunity for Greening Cities and Lighthouse Cities to exchange experiences and collectively reflect on how Urban Nature Plans can be developed and implemented.



Day 1

The UNE opened with an immersive and reflective workshop titled **“Exploring our Connection to Nature”**. The session invited participants to explore their personal and emotional relationships with nature through an arts-based and experiential format. The workshop centered on lived experience and created space for participants to reflect on memories, identities, emotions, and embodied experiences connected to natural environments.

Participants brought photographs or meaningful objects representing their relationship with nature and used these



as starting points for memory-work exercises. Through storytelling, immersion in nature, body



mapping, and embodied reflection, the workshop encouraged participants to examine how nature shapes personal identity, wellbeing, and perceptions of place.

A central element of the session was the use of the IPBES Values Typology, which frames relationships with nature through four interconnected dimensions: living from nature, living with nature, living in nature, and living as nature. Mapping personal experiences against these categories enabled participants to move from individual reflection toward collective

understanding.

The session demonstrated how arts-based methodologies can enrich urban nature planning processes by complementing technical and scientific approaches with emotional, social, and experiential perspectives. An important insight emerging from the workshop was that co-creation processes require time, trust, and vulnerability. By slowing down the pace of discussion and prioritising listening and empathy, the session created a shared space where participants could connect across professional and cultural backgrounds.

The afternoon session focused on one of the recurring challenges identified across the cities: **translating communication strategies into practical implementation activities**. Building on the communication planning work already undertaken by Greening Cities, the workshop explored how cities can operationalise communication objectives through activities, partnerships, and implementation pathways. Particular attention was given to how communication activities can be aligned with target audiences, key messages, available budgets, and broader strategic objectives.



The discussion highlighted that communication is framed as an integral component of Urban Nature Plans that can support participation, build legitimacy, strengthen political support, and foster long-term public engagement.

Participants worked in small groups to refine their communication objectives and identify implementation opportunities linked to local priorities and resources. Discussions explored how the cities can identify strategic moments for engagement, develop locally adapted communication

activities, and better connect communication with measurable outcomes and key performance indicators.



The final session of the day focused on the role of **citizen science in biodiversity monitoring**.

Bringing together city representatives, researchers, and local experts, the workshop explored how citizen science initiatives can contribute to data collection, public engagement, education, and long-term stewardship of urban nature.

The session combined presentations from Belgrade-based academic institutions and project partners with discussions among participating cities. Case studies on butterfly monitoring, bee

monitoring, pollinator gardens, and urban biodiversity mapping demonstrated the diversity of citizen science approaches already being implemented across different contexts.

Cities reflected on their motivations for engaging with citizen science, including the need to improve biodiversity data, strengthen community engagement, influence policy discussions, and increase public awareness of ecological issues.



At the same time, discussions acknowledged persistent challenges related to data quality, technical capacity, institutional trust, and the integration of citizen-generated data into local decision-making systems. Participants also reflected on the importance of designing citizen science initiatives that are accessible, inclusive, and meaningful for participants. Beyond data collection, successful initiatives were described as those capable of creating a sense of ownership and connection between communities and ecosystems.

Day 2

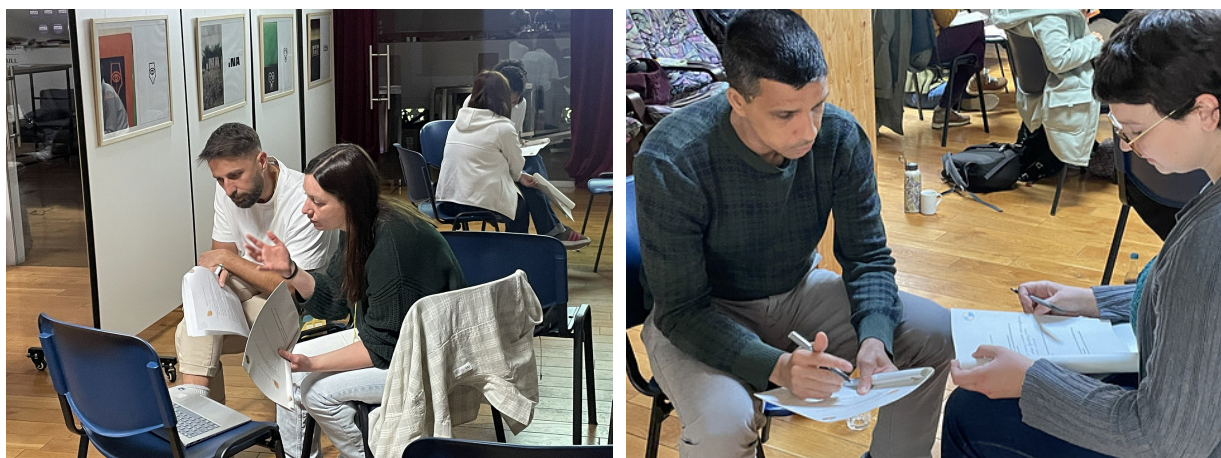
The second day began with a session dedicated to **integrating justice considerations into Urban Nature Plans** and reflecting on policy recommendations emerging from the UNP+ project. The workshop focused on how cities can better document, communicate, and operationalise justice within their planning processes.

Participants reviewed draft policy recommendations and discussed which aspects were most relevant to local contexts, what gaps remained, and how justice-related questions could be embedded more systematically within Urban Nature Plans. The session also advanced work related to documenting



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cities' UNP journeys and milestones. Through paired interviews and facilitated exchanges, participants reflected on how cities can better articulate their experiences, challenges, and learning processes related to biodiversity mainstreaming, co-creation, participation, and governance.



A recurring theme was the importance of understanding how different groups experience urban nature differently depending on social, economic, spatial, and institutional conditions. Participants reflected on the need for Urban Nature Plans to actively engage marginalised and underrepresented communities and to ensure that participation processes move beyond consultation toward more meaningful forms of co-creation. The session confirmed that justice must be treated as a cross-cutting and operational dimension of urban nature planning.

The following session focused on **resilience** and how Urban Nature Planning processes can remain operational under conditions of political uncertainty, institutional fragmentation, and competing urban priorities. Through presentations and peer discussion, Paris, Mannheim, and Belgrade shared experiences of navigating crises, governance disruptions

Through presentations and peer exchange, cities reflected on the governance stressors that frequently affect urban nature planning processes, including electoral changes, administrative restructuring, budgetary instability, shifting political priorities, and accelerating urban development pressures. Discussions highlighted how these dynamics often interrupt long-term environmental planning and create difficulties in maintaining continuity across municipal departments and governance levels.

Participants reflected on the opportunities and limitations associated with translating strategic environmental objectives into operational governance structures capable of supporting implementation over time. Particular attention was given to the need for stable institutional arrangements, cross-departmental collaboration, and stronger integration between planning instruments. An important aspect of the session concerned the distinction between strategic ambition and operational preparedness, as a resilient Plan depends also on monitoring systems, institutional accountability, dedicated responsibilities, and long-term political support.

Following the morning technical sessions, participants visited the Museum of the 90s, a space dedicated to documenting and reflecting on the social, political, and cultural transformations that shaped Serbia during the decade of conflict, sanctions, economic crisis, and institutional transition.

In the afternoon, participants travelled to the **Reva wetland**, on the eastern edge of Belgrade. The guided birdwatching activity offered a direct experience of one of the metropolitan area's most ecologically significant yet vulnerable landscapes.

Accompanied by local experts, researchers, and environmental practitioners, participants explored the ecological functions of the wetland and observed the rich biodiversity hosted within the area. Reva forms part of the internationally recognised "Confluence of the Sava and Danube Rivers": an

Important Bird Area and provides habitat for more than 130 bird species, while also supporting ecological connectivity, flood mitigation, and microclimatic regulation within the wider urban region.



The visit allowed to reflect how areas such as Reva provide critical ecological services while simultaneously facing increasing pressures linked to infrastructural expansion, pollution, dumping, and competing development interests. Particular attention was given to the role of civic organisations, researchers, and local environmental networks in advocating for the protection of ecologically sensitive areas. Discussions illustrated how environmental governance in Belgrade frequently depends on informal coalitions, public mobilisation, and bottom-up initiatives operating alongside formal planning structures. The field visit also encouraged

reflection on the relationship between biodiversity conservation and spatial planning. Participants discussed the difficulties associated with protecting urban wetlands in contexts where development pressures remain strong and where ecological functions are not always mainstreamed within planning processes.

Observing the ecological richness of the wetland alongside the visible environmental pressures affecting the area helped ground the broader discussions on resilience, governance, and biodiversity protection within a tangible territorial context.

The day concluded with a **public panel** organised by CEUS within the [Belgrade International Architecture Week](#) that opened the discussions of the UNE to a broader audience of local practitioners, academics, activists, and civil society actors. The event created a platform for dialogue between international Urban Nature Planning experiences and the specific realities of Belgrade's urban transformation processes.



The first part of the panel introduced the project and ICLEI Europe presented the UNP+ framework, and representatives from Barcelona, Paris, Mannheim shared experiences from their work on UNPs. These contributions highlighted different approaches to biodiversity governance, nature-based solutions, and the integration of urban nature objectives into wider municipal planning frameworks.

Then, project partners went into 'observer mode' and the discussion shifted toward the Belgrade context, where contributions from architects, planners, ecologists, researchers, and activists addressed ongoing tensions surrounding green infrastructure, biodiversity protection, and the governance of rapidly transforming urban areas.

Particular emphasis was placed on the role of civic initiatives and grassroots mobilisation in shaping environmental debates in Belgrade. Participants discussed how public pressure and civil society engagement have increasingly become central components of environmental governance, especially in contexts where institutional coordination remains fragmented and planning decisions are often contested.

Day 3



The third day of the UNE began by exploring **Belgrade's waterfronts** and the evolving relationship between the city and its two major rivers, the Sava and the Danube. Through guided walks led by CEUS along different sections of the riverbanks, participants examined the historical, ecological, political, and spatial transformations that have progressively reshaped some of the most strategic urban areas in the Serbian capital.

Particular attention was given to the ongoing transformation of the Sava waterfront and to the broader implications of the Belgrade Waterfront megaproject. Discussions addressed how recent

redevelopment dynamics have profoundly altered the physical, social, and symbolic relationship between the city and the river. While the regeneration of formerly neglected and infrastructural areas has introduced new public promenades, commercial functions, and residential developments, participants also reflected on the controversies surrounding governance processes, transparency, public participation, and the privatisation of big strategic urban land.

At the same time, the riverbanks continue to function as important ecological and social infrastructures within the metropolitan territory. Participants observed how biodiversity-rich river islands, green corridors, wetlands, and recreational spaces remain deeply interconnected with the identity and everyday life of the city, despite growing urbanisation pressures. This duality, between ecological continuity and speculative urban transformation, emerged as one of the defining characteristics of Belgrade's waterfront condition.



Following the morning walks, participants gathered at the Nebojša Tower for the **visioning workshop dedicated to scenario setting within Urban Nature Planning processes**. The session focused on Step 4 of the Urban Nature Planning framework: building shared long-term visions and identifying possible future trajectories for urban renaturing.

Building on the methodological work initiated during the Mannheim UNE, the workshop introduced participants to structured scenario-building approaches aimed at supporting more anticipatory, collaborative, and transformative planning processes. Greening Cities, Lighthouse Cities, and project partners worked together to identify key drivers capable of influencing future urban development pathways, including governance conditions, climate pressures, demographic change, investment dynamics, participation structures, and spatial planning regulations.

The workshop highlighted the risks associated with fragmented and short-term planning approaches, particularly in rapidly changing metropolitan environments where development pressures can outpace institutional capacities.

The afternoon sessions focused on **reflexive monitoring** and collective reflection on the progress of Urban Nature Planning processes across participating cities. The workshop created space for cities to critically assess their trajectories, identify persistent challenges, and reflect on how learning processes have evolved throughout the UNP+ project.

Using a monitoring canvas, participants reflected on progress across the ten steps of the UNP framework, discussing achievements, setbacks, governance barriers,



and emerging priorities. The sessions emphasised reflexive monitoring as a collaborative and adaptive learning process capable of supporting institutional reflection and continuous adjustment.

Discussions highlighted how implementation pathways are often non-linear and shaped by shifting governance dynamics, stakeholder relations, and external pressures.

An important theme emerging from the workshop concerned the relationship between participation and institutional learning. Participants recognised that co-creation and reflexive governance require time, trust-building, and stable collaboration structures, particularly in contexts where public trust in planning institutions remains fragile.

The sessions also reinforced the importance of peer exchange within the UNE format. By openly discussing challenges related to governance, implementation, and institutional capacity, participating cities were able to identify common patterns across different European contexts while also recognising the specificity of their local conditions.

Day 4

The final day of the UNE focused on translating the reflections into cooperational planning activities linked to the future implementation and legacy of the UNP+ project.

The morning began with a collaborative working session dedicated to the planning of the upcoming **Cities Festival and the UNP+ final symposium**.

Through a World Café format, partners collectively reviewed and refined the draft structure of the nine proposed workshops, discussing how individual sessions could contribute to a coherent overall narrative for the festival. Participants reflected on workshop content, methodologies, resources, and partner responsibilities, while also exploring how to create an engaging and meaningful experience for local and regional governments participating in the event. The discussions highlighted the importance



of connecting technical content with interactive and place-based learning approaches capable of strengthening the dissemination and operational uptake of UNP+ outputs.

The second session focused on the future **development of the Spatial Planning Scheme (SPS) digital tool**. Lighthouse Cities were invited to review and discuss preliminary interface concepts and potential functionalities aimed at making the SPS Operational Matrix operational for cities. Through the analysis of prototype interfaces and existing digital planning tools, participants collectively reflected on usability, user experience, and practical applications within urban governance processes.

Key learnings

The following key learnings are structured around the four main pillars of the project: **Biodiversity, City, Connection,** and **Community**.

-  **Urban Nature Planning requires a paradigm shift away from viewing undeveloped landscapes as incomplete spaces and toward recognising their ecological, social, and territorial value before transformation pressures emerge.**
-  With clear methodologies, institutional backing and ongoing communication in place, **citizen science can strengthen the relationships between municipalities, researchers and communities, and improve understanding of local biodiversity conditions.**
-  As a self-proclaimed 'frontier city' located at the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers, Belgrade exemplifies how **geography, borders, infrastructure, and historical conflict continue to shape contemporary urban planning dynamics.**
-  The Danube and Sava riverfronts illustrate how **urban waterways function simultaneously as ecological corridors and as political, cultural, historical, and economic territories** shaped through centuries of destruction, reconstruction, and transformation.
-  Resilience in Urban Nature Planning can be understood as the **capacity of cities to maintain environmental priorities, institutional learning, and collaborative governance processes despite political change, administrative fragmentation, and development pressure.**
-  **Biodiversity objectives are most effective when embedded within broader territorial and spatial planning frameworks,** including green infrastructure strategies, mobility systems, climate adaptation plans, and metropolitan development visions.
-  **Historical layering and collective memory play a significant role in shaping contemporary "nature governance"** and should be actively acknowledged within planning, participation, and regeneration processes.
-  **Place-based learning and field visits remain essential tools for understanding the complexity of urban ecosystems and connecting strategic discussions with lived territorial realities.**
-  **Urban Nature Planning is not a linear exercise, but an evolving governance process** shaped by negotiation, adaptation, institutional learning, and continuous interaction between public authorities, researchers, and communities.
-  **Environmental activism, civic mobilisation, and civic mobilisation can play a critical role in** protecting ecological spaces, challenging unsustainable development trajectories, and strengthening accountability within urban nature governance processes.

Interested in more in-depth content?

Presentations from the sessions:

- [Exploring our connection to Nature](#)
- [Communication - from planning to implementation](#)
- Citizen Science for Biodiversity Monitoring
 - [Insights from Greening Cities](#)
 - [Belgrade case study - University of Nis, University of Belgrade, Centre for Animal Marking](#)
- [Justice Integration](#)
- Resilience workshop - [presentation from cities](#)
- Urban wetlands: [birdwatching](#) at the REVA wetland
- [Public Panel presentation](#)
- Building a shared vision for renaturing cities
 - [Scenario definition](#)
 - [Lighthouse Cities input](#)
- [Spatial Planning Scheme - Tool collective assessment](#)
- Notes of all sessions can be found [here](#)

Visual impressions

Day I: Welcome to Belgrade. Little Theatre and Botanical Garden!



The little theatre right in front of the bombed TV building in 1999.



Botanical Garden managed by the University of Belgrade, with its bee hotel!

Day II: Birding but also flowers, frogs and much more!



Day III: long walks along the Belgrade waterfront



Photo Credits: Adrian Cabezas, Kassia Rudd, CEUS (Jakov Simovic, Katarina Samurovic)