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Against Embellishments: for Long-term Mechanisms of Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe

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Quick summary

- Shared cultural space and shared memory present a competitive advantage and strength for cultural cooperation in the WB region, but, on the other hand, they are also the biggest source of challenges that arise between nation states. Namely, in all the countries of the region, there are political forces that negate even the obvious shared cultural characteristics, which can best be seen on the example of the Declaration of Common Language, signed in 2017, which provoked heated public debate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia.
- There are two main sets of obstacles to regional cooperation in general and to regional cultural cooperation exchange. The first are the activities of the media, which augment every source of discord among the Balkan states and especially every incident to unforeseeable proportions, and to this very day celebrate and promote individuals whose cases are currently being heard by The International Criminal Court in the Hague, or who have already been convicted by it. The second group of obstacles relate to the different administrative barriers (i.e. visa issues, taxation and customs, infrastructure, mutual framework for recognition of diplomas).
- The enthusiasm for regional cooperation and co-creation among cultural workers in the region is present, particularly in the independent cultural sector, in which there are examples of long-term regional cooperation, such as the Regional Platform for Culture Kooperativa, Nomad Dance Academy, SEE Heritage Network, the Balkan Museum Network and others.
- Popular culture (i.e. joint film and television co-productions, rock, pop and folk music from other countries in the region, the participation of musicians, actors, film workers in the activities of festivals in the region) find ways of circumventing political obstacles, and despite occasional tensions, this does and can contribute to both regional cooperation and reconciliation in the region. On the other hand, the cooperation between cultural institutions is usually limited to exchange of programs (theatre plays, exhibitions, concerts...) mainly between institutions located in the capitals and in larger cities, while joint co-productions are rare since the budgets for such projects in order to be sustainable tend to be high.
- Cultural activities, especially in the case of festivals, offer significant possibilities for audience development at the regional level, as well as for cooperation with tourist organizations and agencies – in the creation of cultural routes, cultural caravans, annual festival tickets and linked cultural events. All this could have significant symbolic and financial effects.
- Support for cultural cooperation in the region of South-East Europe during the 1990's and 2000's was provided by international foundations such as the Open Society Institute, the European Cultural Foundation, Pro Helvetia, Hivos, Erste Foundation, but their activities in the region have ceased.
- The readiness for cultural cooperation in the region of the Western Balkans, and more broadly the South-East Europe region, clearly exists – it is necessary to support those actors who show a willingness to cooperate, and support the existing independent long-term programs of cooperation. The support should be reflected in the creation of long-term mechanisms of financing, providing logistical support for the management of regional projects and the removal of obstacles for the mobility of artists, cultural managers, curators, heritage professionals, researchers, the flow of cultural works, and not in one-time symbolic gestures on which a lot of money is being spent, and which do not bring about any actual effects. The European Union and Berlin process member states should encourage and offer assistance for the creation of long-term mechanisms for supporting cooperation, but the key role in financing and regional cooperation logistics should now be taken over by the countries of the region.

Relevance to regional reconciliation:

The preconditions for cultural cooperation in the region of the Western Balkans and more broadly of South-East Europe clearly exist – they are reflected in the shared cultural space, shared memories (both precious and painful), and in a significant part of the region a shared language, but most importantly, the actors who are already involved in independent and self-originated programs of regional cooperation. It is necessary to support these actors who are showing a willingness to cooperate and whose activities affirm the spirit of reconciliation, based not on the negation of the past, but on dialogue, the creation of a shared policy of memories and a joint European future that will embrace European values. Reconciliation following conflicts and wars is a long-term and all-encompassing process – and thus it cannot be expected that it will be realized only through the activities of culture in a narrow sense. Many other social actors should contribute to it, first of all the mass media, whose activities are currently an obstacle to regional reconciliation, and different educational policies in the countries in the region. However, the creation of long-term mechanisms of support – such as a Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe – would provide an opportunity for the artists, cultural managers, curators, heritage professionals and researchers to significantly contribute to reconciliation in the region. At the same time, removing the obstacles for these activities should not only be limited to the borders of the Balkans, but also the borders of the European Union, countries that “naturally” geographically belong to the South East region and with which numerous examples of cultural cooperation already exist (Croatia and Slovenia especially, but also with Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Greece).

New initiatives like a Museum of Shared Memories could present a joint approach to the valorization of shared memories, a positive and negative heritage, and will put into context historic events that provoke positive feelings, like the Sarajevo Olympic Games, but also provide an opportunity for a critical perspective on negative heritage and memories, war atrocities, and the treatment of Roma community in all countries. In addition, institutions like Yugoslav Drama Theatre, Museum of Yugoslavia, and festivals like “Yugoslav theater festival: Without translation”, The international theatre festival MESS, Literature festival “Half way”, could be efficient instruments in reconciliation, but the financial support from the states is occasional.

List of think-tanks and organizations whose research and/or field reports were used for the preparation of this document:

1. The Center for Studies in Cultural Development, Serbia
2. Europa Nostra, Serbia
3. Kooperativa, Regional Platform for Culture, all countries of the WB and Slovenia and Croatia
4. DokuFest, Kosovo*
5. Jadro, Skopje, North Macedonia
6. Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia, Serbia
7. Akcija, Bosna and Herzegovina
8. Seecult.org, Serbia
9. Centar for Empirical Cultural Studies of South-East Europe, Serbia
10. Exeditio - Center for Sustainable Spatial Development, Montenegro
11. Pine Street Foundation, Albania
12. ADT – Action – Design – Transformation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

13. Asocijacija, Association of Arts and Culture NGOs and Freelancers, Slovenia
14. Kultura Nova, Croatia
15. The Association for Culture and Art Crvena, Bosnia
16. The Contemporary Arts Center, Skopje, North Macedonia
17. Lokomotiva, North Macedonia
18. Social Research Kosova, Kosovo*
19. Center for Research on Religion, Politics and Society, Serbia
20. The Institute for Development and International Relations – IRMO, Croatia
21. Yugoslav Drama Theatre, Serbia
22. Clio, Serbia

Background to the topic:

Having in mind the European Commission Strategy on Cultural cooperation (EC, 2016), especially points regarding the enlargement policy, this brief will define the most relevant issues in regional cultural cooperation that support or burden regional cultural space. Furthermore, the brief will create a set of recommendations, directed at three main decision makers and policy facilitators in this process.

The development of a Cultural Diplomacy Platform of the EU, that should feed into and nurture the process leading to the adoption of the EU-Western Balkans cultural relations strategy as well as the redesign of Regional programs on Culture and Creativity in the WB region, is more than welcomed. At the same time, the Polish presidency of the Berlin process Summit brings the issues of regional cultural cooperation for the first time to the Berlin process format discussions.

However, before defining the main issues for this discussion, it is important to note that so far, the initiatives for fostering regional cultural and artistic ties were limited to particular partnerships in certain areas of culture, while structural and political support by regional leaders was lacking. With Kosovo joining Creative Europe in 2018, all Western Balkan are now participating in the programme, which presents the potential for creating space for people-to-people contact, co-creation, and mutual understanding. Despite this, the percentage of regional organizations getting funds is still quite low. The main challenges are related to individual and institutional capacities to find partners in other countries, and the fact that organizations from the region are looking for partners in bigger countries not in the region itself, since they have more chances of getting funds (the same applies for the Horizon 2020 program). Also, the criteria related to the budget structure (60% for the fund, 30% the national ministry, 10% other sources) is almost a mission impossible for most of the organizations.

The development of a long-term, sustainable model of transnational institutional support for cooperation in the field of culture in the region of South-East Europe is a topic that has occasionally been discussed on different levels, mainly through regional networks like Kooperativa, EUNIC

(network of European Union member states' cultural centers) and the British Council. But following the cessation of the activities of the Balkan Incentive Fund for Culture (BIFC - until 2012); the Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans (SCP - until 2013) or Balkan Arts and Culture (BAC- until 2016), there has been no continued support to regional cultural cooperation and production, or a discussion between civil and public sector stakeholders and decision makers.

Issue 1:

Contested heritage and common cultural memory

Heritage in the region serves both as a cohesive and divisive factor. During the Yugoslav Wars, heritage and contested discourses about the past were one of the most potent ways of fueling the very conflicts of the Yugoslav dissolution. Distinctive heritage of ethnic or religious communities, together with the traces of joint multicultural and Yugoslav heritage, were purposefully attacked and destroyed. Almost 25 years after the wars, regional symbolic conflicts are still successfully played out through competitive heritage interpretations, history textbooks, museum exhibitions, heritage sites and memorial practices. This can be seen even today on the example of the Declaration of Common Language (https://sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deklaracija_o_zajedni%C4%8Dkom_jeziku), signed in 2017, which provoked heated public debate in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia.

The logic of the international community has been that if heritage can be a divisive factor in the region, it could also be turned into a cohesive force. Since the late 1990s, international donors and actors, together with civil society actors have supported heritage initiatives in the name of regional reconciliation. Given the diversity and number of different stakeholders, one cannot talk about heritage-led reconciliation as an agreed-upon, planned and coordinated international process, but as a series of excursions, trials and experiments that had smaller or bigger impacts. Some of the most common approaches have been:

- Post-war reconstruction of destroyed heritage sites.
- Joint trainings and programs for heritage institutions, professionals and the civil society.
- Creating networks and more sustained cooperation.
- Reinterpreting divisive heritage and creating common-shared memory spaces.

These most commonly used approaches have stayed within the comfort zone of both the international and local heritage actors, treating heritage as a universalizing and apolitical field. Thus, they avoided dealing with heritage-related politics, contestations and dissonances, and failed to address the dominant divisive political processes and deeper roots of social violence.

New measures for support for regional cooperation in the field of cultural heritage should include the following:

- Programs supporting regional reconciliation through heritage have to address not only the history, heritage and memory of recent conflicts, but also the practices of cultural heritage institutions (museums, archives, heritage sites), memorial practices, and the deeply rooted

nationalistic, ethno-centric discourses of the self and the other. It is all of these, naturalised historic and heritage narratives that are an important source of symbolic conflict and everyday violence.

- Unlike the previous funding schemes which were designed exclusively for NGOs or human rights initiatives or public heritage institutions, new funding and support programs should foster cooperation between these actors.
- Where most of the funding went for post-war reconstruction of cultural heritage, new funding and support schemes should address the issues of heritage interpretation and reinterpretation.
- Numerous transitional challenges in heritage are shared regionally and there is a strong desire to tackle these challenges on a regional level – the valorisation, protection and interpretation of the common Yugoslav heritage, socialism and anti-fascism; safeguarding and managing historic urban landscapes in numerous cities as well as rural cultural landscapes; recognition and interpretation of the heritage of marginalised groups (Roma, women, LGBTQ, disabled, children, workers, etc.); responsible and informed relation to heritage and history in education; and citizen engagement and participatory governance in heritage safeguarding.
- Support for already existing networks and regional cooperation mechanisms: the SEE Heritage Network, Balkan Museum Network, ICOM SEE, Regional Restoration Camps, etc.

Issue 2:

Cooperation and co-productions in popular culture, exchange of programs of cultural institutions and audience development in the region

Popular culture (i.e. joint film and television co-productions, rock, pop and folk music from other countries in the region, the participation of musicians, actors, film workers in the activities of festivals in the region) finds ways of circumventing political obstacles, and despite occasional tensions, this does and can contribute to both regional cooperation and reconciliation in the region. Creative entrepreneurship, as economic development potential, is in a “No Man’s Land” (Stefanovic, 2018) in all of the countries. Festivals as a popular methodology for connecting people from the region is one method that proves to have a successful track record. For example, the Exit festival has its satellite forms in Montenegro (Sea Dance) and Croatia (Umag).

On the other hand, the cooperation between cultural institutions is usually limited to exchange of programs (theatre plays, exhibitions, concerts...) mainly between institutions located in the capitals and in larger cities, while joint co-productions are rare. Smaller cities are seldom part of these exchanges, although most mid-size towns have public theatres, galleries or cultural centers with a stage. Although the visibility of a such project is potentially huge, and elite public theatres from the region (i.e. the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, HNK – Hrvatsko Narodno Kazalište, Slovenian National Drama Theatre, Montenegrin National Theatre) expressed the will and enthusiasm, the production of big plays with regional stars that could “live” and tour the region is financially impossible without a substantial commitment from different players.

These activities, especially in the case of festivals, offer significant possibilities for audience development at the regional level. The mobility of artists, cultural managers, curators, heritage professionals will not on its own revive the shared cultural space, or contribute to reconciliation. However, if these activities were accompanied by an audience ready to travel, read, listen and purchase cultural products, the effectiveness of these cultural activities with this aim in mind would multiply. And so, it would be necessary to develop a series of programs meant to develop a regional audience and remove any administrative and other barriers to it.

Along the same lines, cooperation with tourist organizations and agencies should be developed – in creating cultural routes, annual festival tickets, linked cultural events, cultural caravans. None of these are currently available, and could exist if they were to receive financial and logistic backup.

Issue 3:

Endangered regional cultural cooperation in the civic sector

The need to establish cultural cooperation in the region of Southeast Europe has been talked about for decades. So far, the only examples of long-term, continuous cooperation can be found in the independent cultural scene. Hence, they are self-originating, created from the need to cooperate, not as a result of a political initiative or an international organization. Their common characteristics are reflected firstly in rejecting the idea that borders of newly emerging countries should prevent cultural cooperation, including the borders of the European Union – organizations from Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria are actively involved in the operation of these networks and platforms. Another characteristic they share is rather mass participation – hundreds of organizations from a dozen countries are involved in regional cooperation through them. Third, due to the unfortunate lack of funds to support their activities, they are faced with the possible termination of their operations.

The central place among them undoubtedly belongs to Kooperativa – a regional platform for culture (<http://platforma-kooperativa.org/en/home/>). It was established in 2012, but its members have been cooperating in various formats since the beginning of the 2000s. At this moment it is made up of 33 organizations, including four national networks of independent scenes from the region: Clubture from Croatia; Asocijacija – an association of non-governmental organizations and independent creators in the field of culture and art from Slovenia; the Association Independent Culture Scene of Serbia, and Jadro – Association of the Independent Cultural Scene from North Macedonia. Through these associations, hundreds of organizations in the independent cultural scene from Southeast Europe are engaged in contemporary art and are involved in regional cooperation.

The Nomad Dance Academy holds an extremely important place in the contemporary dance scene (<http://www.nomaddanceacademy.org/>). It was established in 2005 at the initiative of artists and cultural workers in the field of performing arts with the aim of creating a space for permanent exchange and cooperation in the region and to help overcome – physical, political, and psychological – borders that hinder this cooperation. The Nomad Dance Academy was founded by the Brain Store Project from Sofia; Fičo Ballet from Ljubljana; Lokomotiva from Skopje; Station from Belgrade; Tala Dance Center from Zagreb, and Tanzelarija from Sarajevo. Since 2008, the partner organizations have been organizing several festivals – LocoMotion in Skopje; Zvrk in Sarajevo, Antistatic in Sofia, and Kondenz in Belgrade.

On the other hand, in the field of cultural heritage, we have the SEE Heritage network and the Balkan Museum Network. The SEE Heritage (<http://www.seeheritage.net/>) is a network of non-governmental organizations from South-eastern Europe established in 2006. The initiative for its establishment came from the Cultural Heritage without Borders, a Swedish organization which at that time operated in the region, and twelve other organizations from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia joined. The very next year, NGOs from Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania joined the network. Hence, today this network consists of 30 organizations from the area of South-East Europe that work with cultural heritage. The Cultural Heritage without Borders organization helped to form the Balkan Museum Network (<http://www.bmuseums.net/>), one of the rare examples of the continuous cooperation of cultural institutions in the region, which includes 60 museums from the region and three non-governmental organizations.

Issue 4:

Financial support for culture – international foundations vs. national budgets

It would be logical for the countries of the Western Balkans to support the activities of organizations operating in the field of culture and heritage where they live, work and pay taxes, as well as to back regional cultural cooperation to which they keep stating they are fully committed. However, during the wars in the 1990s, financial backing received by the cultural organizations in these countries for its work from national, regional and local government bodies was minimal, while in the 2000s the support of international donors was continually decreasing. According to the data from the research titled “Out of the Margins - Research and Policy Making on Independent Cultural Scenes in South-East European Societies” (2015 – 2016), which was financially supported by the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by a consortium of research organizations led by the Centre for Empirical Studies of Culture of Southeast Europe on a sample of 200 organizations, the average financial support for the work of these organizations from state bodies in the countries of the region ranged between EUR 3,000 and 6,000 annually (with the exception of Albania where it was significantly higher), while the average donations received by these organizations annually from international donors were generally five to ten times higher (Table 1).

Source of funds	Albania	B-H	Kosovo*	Montenegro	N. Macedonia	Serbia
State support	€ 18,636	€ 5,027	€ 5,909	€ 6,600	€ 3,561	€ 5,058
International donors	€ 35,409	€ 62,085	€ 59,440	€ 28,128	€ 39,298	€ 30,945

In the same period, cultural organizations from the civic cultural sector implemented 883 projects, of which 172 with partners from other countries (mostly from the countries of the region), as well as 5,810 individual cultural programs.

The key role in financing cultural cooperation in the region during the 1990s and 2000s was played by The Open Society Institute (OSI), Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans (SCP), and The European Cultural Foundation (ECF).

However, after the shutting down of the Balkan Art and Culture Fund in 2016 and the drastic reduction in the scope of operation of the Open Society Fund, the engagement of international cultural foundations focused on the region of the Western Balkans virtually ceased to exist. The only remaining option are European Union funds, especially within the Creative Europe program.

It is high time for the countries of the region, with the incentive and support of the European Union, to help in creating the conditions for cultural cooperation in the region, through the establishment of a Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe, with these countries as the sole and long-term donors.

Issue 5:

Proposals for a model of support in the field of contemporary culture and art

There are four key issues related to the establishment of a sustainable regional cultural cooperation. The first issue is the formation of long-term mechanisms of financing and logistics support for the management of regional projects. This would include the formation of a Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe that would in the long run finance projects of regional cultural cooperation. The second issue would be the work on the removal of obstacles for the mobility of artists and cultural goods, such as existing visa regimes (Bosnia-Kosovo* for example) or customs obstacles. The third issue would be the readiness for these activities to neither be limited by the borders in the Balkans, nor the borders of the European Union, so that other countries of South-East Europe (primarily Slovenia and Croatia, then Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary or Greece, with which collaboration has already been established) could take part in the regional cooperation and its funding. And the final issues would be that the key role in the financing or logistics support of regional cultural cooperation be taken over by the countries in the region, while the governance needs to be based on regional and international experts, artists and cultural operators. The European Union should provide an incentive and offer support for the creation of these long-term mechanisms, and through the process of negotiation with the candidate countries clearly indicate that this is something that reflects the spirit of the European Union. Without the readiness on the part of the countries in the region to create long-term mechanisms of support, to finance and maintain them, it is not realistic that there will be any kind of regional cultural cooperation and exchange.

Recommendations:

To decision-makers in the Western Balkans:

1. Launching a Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe, long-term mechanisms of financing under the umbrella of the Berlin Process mechanism. A possible model for this Fund could be the Nordic Culture Fund <https://www.nordiskkulturfond.org/en>. In order to prevent the operations of the Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe from being obstructed by daily politics and political pressures, the Fund would have to be governed in a participatory manner, which would include cultural operators themselves and EU and SEE cultural experts.
2. Removing administrative obstacles for the mobility of artists, cultural workers, cultural professionals and mobility of cultural goods in the region. Thus, the formation of a regional task force (financial experts, producers and managers in the arts and culture and cultural heritage) that could jointly work on overcoming technical burdens and barriers in the areas of exchanging cultural productions and goods between the countries. This task force would prepare recommendations for specific legislations that would address these burdens.

3. Creating national cultural policy instruments and mechanism that will embrace and support regional cooperation and participation in EU cultural programs. This mean having obligatory financing from national budgets dedicated to the regional cooperation, that would not be only symbolic. Thus, putting regional cooperation as a priority in the national strategy documents.

To the EU:

1. The EU should support the launch of a Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe in addition to the Creative Europe Window for the Western Balkans. In the establishment of the Fund, the European Union and Berlin process member states should encourage and offer assistance for the creation of long-term mechanisms for supporting cooperation, but the key role in financing and regional cooperation logistics should now be taken over by the countries of the region. This is the only way to establish sustainable long-term cultural cooperation in the region and a good way for countries in the region to show their commitment to regional cooperation.
2. The EU should encourage neighboring countries from the region - Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary and others to join the initiative. It would not just make the funds of the Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe bigger, but would also ease the anxieties that this would lead to some sort of reestablishment of the Yugoslav space present in some of the WB countries; it would help the reconciliation processes which are not limited to the countries of Western Balkans, but also include unsolved problems from the past between Serbia - Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina - Croatia, Bulgaria -Macedonia, Albania - Greece etc.

Initiating discussions with interested players in the cultural and policy field about the creation of a regional think tank that will be devoted to the arts and culture.

To the member-states:

Neighboring EU member states like Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece could give a major impetus in the creation of the Fund for Cultural Cooperation in South-East Europe by showing their readiness to participate – financially, logistically and in creating joint and exchanging cultural programs in the region.

Neighboring EU member states could also join programs of addressing the issues of heritage reconstruction, interpretation and reinterpretation and of creating common-shared memory spaces.

In the process of building human capital, creating opportunities for artists residencies, mobility schemes, mentoring, scholarships by the Member states that would be devoted to the WB countries.

EU Member states that face low support for the enlargement, could use cultural diplomacy for changing the narrative and the dominant perception.

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