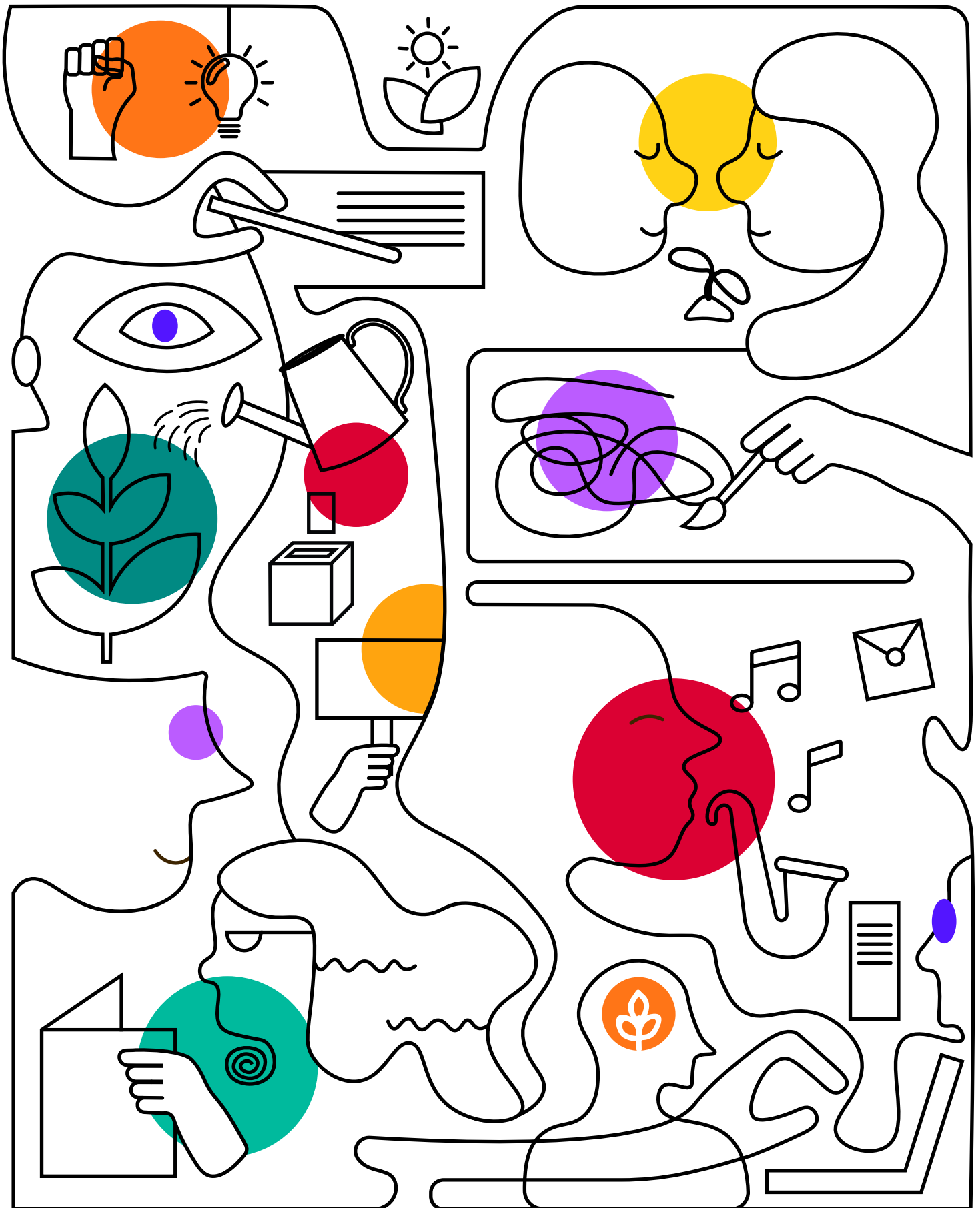


HOW ARTS & CULTURE

PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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Authors

Vana Filipovski

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Hana Deva

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How arts and culture promote democratic values in the Western Balkans

By: Vana Filipovski

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How arts and culture promote democratic values in the Western Balkans

Over the last 30 years, the Western Balkan countries have been shifting from socialist and authoritarian regimes to democratic ones striving for independent institutions, civil rights and liberties, and the rule of law. However, this transition has been slow and often stagnant, categorized as illiberal equilibrium¹ – a state of constant leaning between Eastern autocracy and Western democracy. In analyzing democratization, research often focuses on governments, institutions, political leaders, and political parties. Yet, to fully understand this process one cannot overlook the role played by civil society in engaging citizens², promoting democratic values, and contributing to the achievement of ‘an effective democracy³’ (empowering socioeconomic conditions that make people capable of practicing democracy and empowering sociocultural conditions that make them willing to do so)⁴. Civil society indeed directly depends on the values shared by “ordinary people” and their empowerment as actors of change, bottom-up.

The potential contribution of, and the role played by civil society organizations working in art and culture is, however, often underestimated. In fact, these organizations can be the key actor for ‘human empowerment’ of citizens as they are building social capital, trust, and common values, as the basis of an effective democracy, while also fostering imagination and creativity, capacities that are crucial in impact on the individual and the community to face complex issues. One of the most recent complex issues was the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown the importance of culture for people’s well-being, as reading, watching series, or being engaged in any creative activity, helped us in taking a pause from everyday reality. Furthermore, the downsizing of cultural and creative sectors had a negative impact on the economy of cities and regions in terms of jobs and revenues, and levels of innovation.⁵

To understand the degree of the social impact of culture and art in the Western Balkans, this policy brief used desk research and semi-structured interviews with more than 70 cultural and artistic organizations (CAOs), collectives, and independent cultural centers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia. It analyzed their approaches and methods, with aim of presenting the social and political impact they are generating in relation to the democratization process in the region. As a result, the paper focuses on the impact that CAOs have in the promotion of reconciliation and dialogue, transitional justice, human rights (with a special emphasis on marginalized groups), and civic participation, among others.

1. Arts and culture as mediums of seeking the truth and reconciling with the past

CAOs are highly involved in process of reconciliation in the region, by seeking the truth, preserving the memory, and being engaged in the healing process. Arts and culture’s ability to trigger emotional responses can be a useful tool in the restorative approach to reconciliation, as they are helpful in easing the sharing of interpersonal experiences and

building new relationships, thus promoting solidarity, social justice, and tolerance. By doing so they also serve as a conflict prevention method.

In Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, CAOs are highly engaged in the process of dealing with the past through theater, film, and different types of exhibitions (photography, video, installations). Through desk research and interviews with more than 30 organizations, this paper found that in other countries these topics are tackled very rarely (Montenegro) or not in programmatic focus at all (Albania, North Macedonia).

Focusing on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, theatrical practices have two areas of intervention: seeking the truth by revisiting the past and healing process for the victims who experienced violence or suffering caused by war. Theater plays like *Hypermnnesia* directed by Selma Spahić and *Patriotic Hypermarket* (Kulturanova and Qendra Multimedia), which are dealing with personal sufferings caused by war and critical rethinking of war narratives, became important elements of truth-seeking initiatives, from the human, rather than a political perspective. The latter was part of a bigger research project *Views: Personal Histories of Serbs and Albanians*, in which 40 individuals of Serbian and Albanian ethnic origin from Kosovo were interviewed about their personal memories of Serbo-Albanian conflicts, their versions of the future and the possibilities of cohabitation. Play *Vavilon* in production by Dah Theater in 1991, told a story of women who experienced violence during war, which invoked other women who experienced the same atrocities, but were blocked in their own emotional state, to share their stories after the play, helping them in completion of the healing process and return of their dignity, thus enabling them to be recognized in their community. Other theatre plays with the same area of interventions are being produced by the Center for Cultural Decontamination (play *Srebrenica. When we dead arise*), Qendra Multimedia (play *Bordel Balkan*), and Memory Module program from MESS Theatre Festival in Sarajevo.

Photography, video, and other installation exhibitions, also ease the healing process and contribute to the preservation of collective memory. Their universal language can be an extremely powerful reminder of the consequences of war. Some of the exhibitions focus on the weakest and most vulnerable groups of society such as the permanent exhibition ‘*Once upon a time and never again*’ of the Documentation Center Kosovo, dedicated to all killed and missing children in the Kosovo War 1998/9, as well as exhibitions of The War Childhood Museum. *Bogujevci Family* exhibition (Heartefact Fund) showcased the reconstructed living room of the Bogujevci family, whose 14 members (out of 19) were killed in 1999 by Serbian Police’s reserve unit Škorpioni. The remaining five family members that survived the attack were involved in the creative process, providing them with an opportunity to undergo a part of the healing process, while at the same time asking for accountability in the perpetrator’s country. The exhibition itself has triggered public discussion as it got media and political attention.

With a higher chance of reaching a wider audience, films are a powerful tool for

communication and awareness-raising, but also unintentionally initiate change. The movie *Grbavica* by Jasmila Žbanić on women victims of sexual violence during war has influenced the change of Law on sexually assaulted women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ognjen Glavonić's *Depth 2* initiated regional discussion on mass graves of Albanian victims hidden in Serbia. The film toured in the region causing strong, emotional reactions from both Serbians and Albanians, using the discussion to outline the importance of accountability and justice for victims.

2. Arts and culture serve as initiators of dialogue and after-war reconnection

In Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, arts and cultural initiatives are included in rebuilding relationships between societies during wars as well as after the '90s, by creating alternative spaces for dialogue. During the war in Bosnia, the Pavarotti Music Center in the divided city of Mostar provided a space for interaction between Bosniaks and Croats. Kamerni Theater in Sarajevo held over eight hundred theater and music performances, and prayers for peace uniting people regardless of their ethnicity or religion. In Skopje, when North Macedonia was about to split between its two peoples, a mixed theater company performed in the Albanian language showing possibility to interact and work together regardless of ethnic background.

Due to still frozen conflict, there are far more cultural initiatives with a focus on Kosovo-Serbia cooperation. *The Intercultural icebreakers programme* implemented by the Helsinki Committee of Human Rights in Belgrade gathered artists and cultural workers from Serbia and Kosovo, providing them with an opportunity to meet, learn about each other's culture and perspectives and develop joint artistic initiatives. *Reconnection* program between Heartefact Fund (Serbia) and Qendra Multimedia (Kosovo), is using artistic residencies, translation of books, and theater for creating a channel of communication between societies, while *Miredita, Dobar dan* annual festival gathers artists and cultural operators from the two countries. Theater plays, film screenings, exhibitions, and public discussions, provide participants with an opportunity to promote and learn about the culture of the other thus enhancing ties between Serbia and Kosovo. KROKODIL, a regional literature association, was among the first ones who were bringing Kosovo authors to Belgrade and supported literature exchange between Kosovo and Serbia.

Such initiatives result not only in cultural enrichment, but also help to break down stereotypes and prejudices about "the other" and enhance mutual understanding. Results of the survey⁶ conducted two years after the program *Intercultural icebreakers* showed that most of the participants had indeed changed their initial view about their neighbors, reducing stereotypical viewpoints and behaviors.⁷

By touring with films and theater plays throughout the region, organizations such as East West Sarajevo, Sarajevo Film Fest, Dokufest in Prizren and Beldocs in Belgrade, are presenting dialogue by themselves. Its regional character of co-productions is preserving

the space of encounters between artists and audience, regardless of the political situation in the region, creating a highly democratic atmosphere that is also transferred to the audience through the topics of the film. In this way, the audience contributes to the “possibility of creating a dialogue” as well as empowering its beneficial, healing effects for societies.

3. Culture and art raise awareness on the violation and protection of human rights

CAOs in the Western Balkans are raising awareness of human rights by promoting solidarity, tolerance, pluralism, and freedom of choice and movement. They create a conducive environment for interpersonal trust by supporting women, the LGBT+ community, and other marginalized groups offering them space for self-expression. Research shows that people with self-expression values tend to seek democracy, as they give high priority to free choice in leading one’s life⁸. CAOs are raising awareness through festivals, public performances, film screenings, educational programs, and creative campaigns.

Festivals such as *Femart* and *Polip* in Kosovo serve as platforms for discussions and public engagement on gender equality and women’s rights. Interviewed CAOs have also been contributing to the #metoo movement through creative campaigns, public discussion, and workshops, highlighting social challenges faced by women in the region.

Heartefact Pride Theater Festival, the first initiative of this kind in the region, leverages theater to shed a light on the LGBT+ community’s struggles making them more accessible to a wider audience. By sensitizing the public, the initiative advocates for equal opportunities for a community that is still highly marginalized and discriminated against in the region.

CAOs use theater also to promote multiculturalism and pluralism. Dah theater from Serbia tells stories of different cultures within the city in the moving bus, showing pluralism of religion, ethnicity, and culture. The bus represents a tolerance test, and at the same time fights against nationalism by valorizing and respecting differences in which the audience driving in the bus, learn about the multiculturalism of their cities. Through music, the Art Aparat organization is raising awareness against prejudices and stereotypes of the Roma community in Serbia, by engaging the audience with music performances, fostering pluralism and multiethnicity.

Arts and culture are vocal in addressing ecological crises and seeking social justice, as well. In the fight for clean water in a small village in North Macedonia, Contemporary Art Center with locals created several creative actions for more than 3 years, among which the performance with fake bottles of water named *Arsenal*, in reference to arsen, a toxic substance found in water, was the most covered by the media. Once the performance got media attention, local decision-makers couldn’t ignore the problem and finally, the

problem with unclean water was solved.

4. Culture and art are fostering active participation

The success of cultural and artistic initiatives in the region is that they create space for different groups to develop themselves in respect of their identities and their differences, in this way transcending the division between observation and activism. They engage citizens at the local level through activities that are inherently connected with their beliefs, values, and attitudes. By doing so they enable possibilities for structural change⁹ and enhance bottom-up democratization. These practices are mostly present in independent cultural centers, self-organized as safe places for artistic creation and social activity, which by organizing different cultural events enhances local community engagement and community growth. Examples of these spaces in Serbia are KC Magacin, Kvaka 22, Gnezdo, in Kosovo Kino Armata, Termokiss, Tek Bunkereri (Albania), Art Institut (North Macedonia).

For example, the cultural center Gnezdo in Kruševac is engaging the local community by offering them the center as a space where they can connect with others by creating programs and content by themselves. They also organized workshops in acting for kids with no parents and kids from the center for autism, which resulted in the production of theater plays, allowing them to be included in the community and treated as equal. Termokiss in Kosovo was the first safe space for the transgender community by organizing Drag show events, which not just involved them in the community, but offered a space in which their differences are celebrated. Presenting a space that has a decision-making process based on equality and justice, and is designed for the citizens, like KC Magacin in Serbia, presents democracy in little.

Cultural and art organizations are handing citizens creative and community-building tools to continue invoking change, while at the same time subconsciously inheriting values and a value system that nourishes solidarity, tolerance, equality, and self-expression, that is democratic in nature. In a small Muslim village in North Macedonia in which the role of women is highly traditional and conservative, Contemporary Art Center supported summer cultural activities engaging them through baking pita (pies), as an important part of their cultural heritage. Before these events, women haven't been going to local kafana (restaurants) nor were they included in planning or any type of decision-making in their village. Being involved in cultural activities, liberated them, and gave them the power to change their status, resulting in some of the women working in municipalities, actively participating in their communities.

Challenges and obstacles

In societies in a transition period, such as Western Balkans, instead of using arts and culture to support the region's political and economic rehabilitation, they are often

neglected by decision-makers and donors, which primarily indicates the lack of clear cultural strategies and policies, and very low percent of the states' budgets dedicated to culture.

Since 2009, Serbia adopted a law on culture and since then, struggled to create a clear strategy which was finally adopted 11 years later from 2020 to 2029, but followed by its rejection of the independent cultural scene due to lack of discussion and transparency¹⁰. Last strategic document in Bosnia and Herzegovina was in 2008, with later developed action plans which are mostly related to education, not explicitly mentioning artistic and cultural production¹¹. North Macedonia drafted a new National Strategy for Protection of Cultural Heritage in 2020, while a working group was developed to evaluate the need for a separate law for the performing arts¹², which seems like progress, but if we look at the budget for culture, we can see it reduced in comparison to 2020 by 31%. In Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania, the budget for culture is under 1%, while in Montenegro, from 2.5% of the total budget, with the new law, culture remains without guaranteed funds from the budget. With insufficient states' support, the EU is the largest provider of financial assistance in all the Western Balkan countries through programs such as Creative Europe and Erasmus.

While budgets for culture are low, there is an increase in capital investments in the region, which shows an absence of general understanding and recognition of the social significance the arts and cultural sector bring. This is backed by no open dialogue between the civil society sector and governments, where decisions are made top-down with no adequate transparency in terms of discussions and inclusion of all relevant actors¹³. On the other hand, based on the interviews, CAOs have no standardized approach to evaluating the impact of their projects, nor they are positioning themselves in relation to the potential impact they can have in society. The missing link between artistic production and its impact is in policy development which can make them more visible and relevant negotiating actors against governments.

Lack of recognition comes from the media side as well, as arts and cultural events and content are insufficiently promoted due to high number of sensationalistic-orientated media. On the other hand, with low budgets, CAOs are often left with no money for marketing, which is affecting their visibility and lowering impact of their work. The shared feeling among interviewees was the fatigue of cultural workers and artists due to low salaries, and lack of a proper space to work or showcase their work. This is a general message that arts and culture are not the priority. Many are dependent on external funding, mostly from foreign donors such as the EU, who are driven by results-orientated approaches and bureaucratic hurdles. Limited professional perspectives, skills gaps, and a lack of training opportunities also hinder the development of the sector¹⁴. Cultural operators in the region, particularly non-governmental organizations, need more dedicated support to face these challenges.

How to empower arts and cultural initiatives to expand their contribution to the democratization process?

• **Improve evaluation methods and longitudinal measurements of social impact**

Most CAO in the region don't have standardized evaluation methods which will allow them to follow progress. Based on interviews, the paper found that the reason for this is because the effectiveness of arts and culture to social and political changes cannot be measured in the short term, and secondly, due to their nature which is not necessarily focused on creating social impact.

For CAOs: form a standardized approach in measuring the longitudinal effectiveness of projects by setting specific indicators for social impact. Some of them can be related to knowledge (what people know), discourse (what people communicate), attitudes (what people feel and think), capacity (what people can do), action (what people do), and policies (what change is sustained)¹⁵. Evaluation processes may be done by personal testimony, case studies, press coverage, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys which can be offered through reports to donors as additional values. In this way, concrete results related to change in communities, or just people's perceptions and feelings would be as valued as concrete quantitative results such as the number of audiences, media coverage, number of staging, etc.

For donors: Use more user-friendly templates for reporting, which are more based on storytelling and qualitative indicators. Experience and personal transformations cannot be measured short term, while art is not always documentable with tangible outcomes.

• **Enhance the exchange of good practices and lessons learned**

For CAOs: the whole region could benefit from stronger cooperation. This can be achieved by organizations who have common programmatic themes (e.g. enhancing cooperation between Kosovo and Serbia, enhancing reconciliation process between Serbia and Bosnia) initiating "cooperation meetings" on the national and subnational level, creating space for a better connection with other CSOs, not necessarily arts and cultural ones. In this way, good practices will be enhanced, while at the same time potential mistakes or repetitions would be avoided, which eventually can create a stronger strategic impact on certain social and political changes as a way forward to consolidated democracy. With stronger connections, there would be more space for advocating for the values of arts and culture and sharing the impact it can have on communities.

For decision-makers: artistic cooperation can be a model form of cooperation in the region which can improve the image of the Balkans in Europe and beyond. Ministries of Culture can initiate monthly meetings with CAOs representatives to hear their needs, understand the challenges and learn from bottom-up initiatives.

To develop a strategically planned, open-minded cultural policy, include CAOs in collaborative dialogue with existing state-funded public institutions, both locally and nationally. CSOs should be a part of the decision-making process developed through partnerships which can include activities such as participatory forums, and the establishment of co-decision-making bodies.

Include CAOs in dialogue related to practices of dealing with the past. In the Western Balkans where the process of reconciliation is very hard and stagnant, soft approaches to arts and culture can be refreshing, unimposing, and easier to empathize with.

- **Adopt a flexible perspective to funding**

For donors: support cultural organizations based on the sensitivity of the organization and projects. Some organizations could benefit from long-lasting core funding, while some would suit more project-based funding. Flexibility in funding would help cultural organizations work proficiently, according to their needs and capacities. The weakness of cultural organizations in the Western Balkans is the discontinuity of their work, sometimes long, other times short-term, due to financial instability and high staff turnover, leading them to be overworked and underpaid.

Support projects who are dealing with reconciliation efforts and peacebuilding. The infrastructure of the independent arts scene, with its post-war vitality, visibility, and willingness to cooperate across borders should not be taken as a given, but actively strengthened.

Support community-based cultural practices outside of capital to enhance citizens' engagement and motivate them to be active participants.

Support CAOs in developing mechanisms and capacity building for regional social and political impact. CAO workers lack education on how to work and facilitate the progress of the community without pushing their attitudes and perceptions. This can be done through job shadowing mechanisms or engaging external consultants.

- **Enhance communication over traditional and online media**

In the whole region, the media is interested in sensational news and politics, leaving little or no space for covering community-based stories related to arts and culture, thus lowering the chance of initiating social or political change.

For CAOs: develop project-related partnerships with local media and in this way draw attention to the project's activities and create a greater chance for social impact.

Social media and optimal web presence are getting higher attention from younger

audiences than traditional media, so creative low-budget campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, or Tik Tok have become essential for the visibility and engagement of audience/participants to the projects. With a lot of artistic content, campaigns can be attractive to different target groups and can grow an online community. Most organizations that don't have websites can use social media to share their annual reports, and successful stories of their projects, thus creating space for a better connection with other CAOs and local communities, engaging them in their work. Greater visibility is the potential to attract new donors and partners.

To make projects and their impact more visible, CAOs can use a combination of an artistic and analytical approach to developing small publications or reports, which communicate their goals and achievements through online channels. Apart from being more open to a wider audience and having an interactive dialogue with them, this practice can be valuable in positioning an organization in a way that is easier to advocate for change in society.

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