



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Establishing a place in the European cultural space

*Grassroots cultural action and practices of self-governance in Southeast Europe*

Vos, C.

**DOI**

[10.4324/9781003191698-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003191698-9)

**Publication date**

2023

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Diversity of Belonging in Europe

**License**

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Vos, C. (2023). Establishing a place in the European cultural space: Grassroots cultural action and practices of self-governance in Southeast Europe. In S. Eckersley, & C. Vos (Eds.), *Diversity of Belonging in Europe: Public Spaces, Contested Places, Cultural Encounters* (pp. 117-134). (Critical Heritages of Europe). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003191698-9>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Establishing a place in the European cultural space

### Grassroots cultural action and practices of self-governance in Southeast Europe

*Claske Vos*

---

#### Introduction

“We simply need more air to breathe in these circumstances of criminal flows, corruption, nepotism, and right wing tendencies. They make life less possible, less creative and less free. Culture and arts are tools to create more air to breathe” – this interview extract with art historian and curator from Bihać in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights the value of culture and arts. When he noticed how the local government started to devalue culture in the town in which he lives, he decided to act and invest in culture and arts projects to protect spaces of creativity. This art historian is by no means alone in his views. The urge to use culture and arts as a means to create room for manoeuvre in increasingly constraining conditions has been a driving force for many grassroots cultural organizations in Southeast Europe. They see culture and arts as essential for the opening up of spaces in which alternatives can be shown. In the words of one of the founders of Cultural Center REX, a centre for contemporary art and engaged cultural practice in Belgrade: “It is about maintaining the potential of some sort of alternative society. Not to distance yourself from even the smallest possibility to say what you think about the existing problems”.

In their attempts to create more air to breathe, these grassroots cultural actors depend on international funding. This chapter looks at the effect of such funding schemes on these processes of space-making and belonging in (potential) candidate states in Southeast Europe and more specifically in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia.<sup>1</sup> It focuses particularly on one of these international funding schemes: the cultural subprogramme of the EU Creative Europe programme. The Creative Europe programme has been open for (potential) candidate states since 2014 with its main aim to provide a place for cultural actors from non-EU states in the EU’s cultural space and to stimulate new forms of European belonging (European Commission, 2016). As stated in the most recent European Agenda for Culture: culture “tops the list of factors most likely to create a feeling of community” (European Commission, 2018, pp.1–2). Both the EU and the grassroots cultural actors interrelate culture with processes of place and space-making and see it as a means to enable new

forms of belonging. Yet while the space advocated by the EU in (potential) candidate states is primarily tied to notions of European belonging, cultural diplomacy, and enlargement, the grassroots cultural organizations primarily focus on notions of belonging that have become marginalized in both the local and the European contexts. The chapter aims to flesh out what happens when these different notions of space-making and belonging become entangled and negotiated.

It does so by, first of all, discussing the way in which the EU sees the interrelation between culture, space, and belonging. For this purpose, official EU policy documents are examined, mapping the ways in which the EU has aimed to use culture to create a European cultural space in which new forms of belonging can be instigated. Second, it focuses on the encounters of grassroots cultural actors from Southeast Europe with EU-funded cultural initiatives. Who makes use of the funding schemes and what are the processes of space-making and belonging that are brought about by means of their participation in the funding schemes? For this purpose, semi-structured qualitative interviews were held with 50 grassroots cultural actors, policymakers, and cultural experts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia in the timeframe from 2016 up to 2020. Twenty-three interviews were held with representatives of grassroots organizations that were successful in obtaining EU funding from the Creative Europe programme. Moreover, 16 interviews were held with members of grassroots organizations that had not (yet) been successful in obtaining funding from the Creative Europe programme, but successfully obtained funding from other international funding bodies. Additionally, 11 interviews were held with the representatives of the Creative Europe Desks, the ministries responsible for the Creative Europe programme, and with a number of local experts with long-term experience in the cultural field.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the chapter discusses the different interpretations of space-making of both the EU and the grassroots cultural organizations and reveals the multiple entanglements at play in these attempts to interconnect space and belonging through culture and arts in a part of Europe located at the margins of the European cultural space.

Ultimately, the chapter hopes to provide new insights into the complexities of processes of space-making brought about by EU-funded cultural initiatives in Southeast Europe by analyzing the effects of the overlapping social, cultural, and political spaces that emerge as a result of these funding schemes. As will become clear, for grassroots cultural organizations in Southeast Europe, the interpretations of belonging to the European cultural space are strongly influenced by the socio-political circumstances in which they operate, their dependency on international funding schemes, and their affiliation to the post-Yugoslav space. While the post-Yugoslav space determines the cultural, social, political, and economic position of the cultural actors, the European cultural space offers possibilities to alter their position in a variety of ways. It reveals that the European cultural space becomes reinvented and renegotiated by those who participate in it – funders as well as cultural organizations – enriching and extending this space.

## Culture, space, and belonging in EU cultural initiatives

Dating back to the 1970s, the EU has stressed the need for the creation of a European cultural space. It sees such a space of cultural diversity, dialogue, and mutual listening and learning as indispensable to establish new connections between people and instigate new forms of “belonging” to the European community. Several programmes have been installed in which culture has been given multifaceted instrumental value to strengthen economic and political integration. The idea is that these programmes create spaces in which European values, standards, and technologies can freely flow, allowing for new forms of associations between diverse groups of people in Europe. Culture is presented as a crucial ingredient to create a public space of engagement in which ‘European citizenship can become a tangible reality’ (European Parliament and the Council, 2006, p.1).

This approach to culture as a means to stimulate a sense of belonging presupposes consensus amongst its participants about the European dimension of this space. As such, it resembles what Habermas once wrote about the value of the public sphere as a participative space of deliberation, which he saw as indispensable for the strengthening of citizens’ identification with the EU (2015). As he argued, within the public sphere – which operates outside the domain of the state and provides a space to voice, share, and debate opinions – individuals become part of a wider political community (1984, 1990). Typical of his interpretation of the public sphere is that its premise is the possibility and desirability of consensus. It takes for granted that agreement will be the outcome of the encounters between people with different positions within the space. This resembles what Anthias (2013) has observed when examining integration and diversity discourses in the EU and the UK. She established that “culture has become rather mechanically tied to belonging because difference and belonging are treated as mutually exclusive” (2013, p.325). In other words, without a common interpretation of European culture, and a culturalization of social identity, belonging cannot be achieved.

A similar premise can be found in the ways in which the EU envisages its cultural space. As Cris Shore once observed regarding the early stages of EU cultural policy formation: “where cultural diversity *is* promoted, it is invariably within a conception of a greater, composite, pan-European whole” (Shore, 2006, p.20). Indeed, as the European Commission more recently stated in the 2018 European Agenda for Culture, culture “tops the list of factors most likely to create a feeling of community. [...] There is clear scope to increase cultural participation, and bring Europeans together to experience what connects us rather than what divides us” (2016, pp.1–2). Through its cultural initiatives, the EU tries to create an ideational space – a space of contact and transfer – using culture as a means to encourage border crossings and the proliferation of imaginative communities (see Halle, 2014, p.10). Belonging is thus only to some extent related to a bounded spatiality and demarcated materialities, but is primarily socially determined by the ability to participate, exchange, and transfer. Belonging emanates from taking part in activities that are accommodated under a presupposed European label.

The way in which the EU hopes to create this ideational space has taken different forms and shapes. One way has been to use culture to develop a shared European cultural frame of reference. The development of such a frame entails the investment in the development of narrations of a European past, heritage, and memory, with their primary aim to affect people's emotions and make them feel more European and connected to Europe, the EU, and other Europeans (Lähdesmäki, 2017). Typical examples are the European Heritage Label and the European Capital of Culture programme. Here we see a clear "politics of belonging" in which European belonging is discursively constructed to set boundaries of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion (see Yuval-Davis, 2006). Another way has been to support cultural projects that encourage participation and strengthen cooperation amongst European citizens. Here belonging to the European space of engagement is not necessarily generated by a particular framing and/or staging of Europe which can trigger identification, but is expected to more naturally evolve from the act of participating in cultural initiatives (Vos, 2022, pp.743–744). Finally, a third way has been to connect culture to developments deemed relevant for European integration at large. Some of these were there from the start – for example, economic growth and employment. Others entered the programme more recently, such as gender equality, climate, the digital age, and international relations.<sup>3</sup> By emphasizing the transversal value of culture and its intersection with other EU policy fields, the EU emphasizes the capacity of culture to respond to European challenges, which legitimizes the spending of the EU budget in the field of culture (Littoz-Monnet, 2012).

In the several EU documents representing the role of culture in EU policy the different EU institutions thus present culture as both the symbolic basis of as well as the functional means for the establishment of the European cultural space (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2021, p.52; Vos, 2022, p.744). Culture allows for the creation of a space in which citizens are invited and feel more connected to their fellow European citizens by means of actively constructing this space as well as facilitating and encouraging active participation within this space. Andrea Cornwall has referred to such spaces as invited spaces. Typical for invited spaces is that external resource-bearing agents – in this case, the diverse EU (funding) programmes – bring these into being and provide a frame for participation within them (Cornwall, 2002, p.17). Characteristic of the EU in its establishment of these frames of participation is that it primarily does so by means of funding mechanisms. Adhering to the subsidiarity principle, the EU cannot impose legislation and member states have full competence in the field of EU cultural policy and has to resort to "soft forms of governance" to bring about change in the field of culture (see Vos, 2017, pp.680–682).

While these forms of governance to some extent lead to the harmonization and standardization of approaches to culture (Karaça, 2009, p.30; Lähdesmäki, 2014; Vos, 2017), they also leave room for negotiation. The EU determines the frames for participation in its programmes and funding schemes, but the participants are responsible for the further implementation and realization of the funded projects.

Even though the EU considers culture an important tool to facilitate identification with the European community and encourage integration processes, participants applying for the EU funding schemes might have different reasons behind their engagement in these schemes. As Randall Halle argued in his reflections on the attempts of the EU to constitute itself as a space designed to eliminate state borders, the increased mobility has not generated a condition in which people move without borders and boundaries; rather it has expanded experiences of contact and cohabitation (Halle, 2014). In these instances of encounter created by processes of space-making, intersectional (Yuval-Davies, 2011) or multiple scales of belonging (Antonsich, 2010) are bound to emerge.

### **Southeast European encounters with the European cultural space**

The majority of the Southeast European organizations that take part in the Creative Europe programme are representatives of the independent cultural scenes of their countries (see Vos, 2022, p.744). Some of these actors started their work in the first half of the 1990s while other organizations emerged in the past decades. What all these organizations share is that they fight against the developments that mark the region's failed post-socialist transition after the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Largely triggered by the international community, neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, and liberalization started to determine the political landscape of the region (Horvat and Štiks, 2014; Tomašević et al., 2018, p.65), followed by the growth of unemployment, brain drain, and the rise of xenophobia, further deepening existing tensions in the region (Čukić and Timotijević, 2020, p.44).

#### ***Maintaining the potential of an alternative society***

In these circumstances of failing post-socialist transition, social movements, organizations, and locally based community initiatives took the role of occupying and creating spaces for providing social services in a context of scarcity. The culture and art sector was central in this effort to create spaces in which the general public could channel its dissatisfaction, alternatives could be shown, and creativity and free thought could be expressed (Dragičević-Šešić, 2018). Organizations from this sector experimented with different forms of community-based management of resources and co-production, and by doing so, gained an increasingly significant role in opening up new perspectives for social and political transformation (Čukić and Timotijević, 2020, p.44; Horvat and Štiks, 2014, p.13). As indicated by interviewee at Cultural Center REX in Belgrade, “the aim was to develop a place and a space where we could generate language and knowledge free of everyday propaganda”. In their work, the grassroots cultural actors emphasize the need for space in which (intercultural) dialogue could take place about the politics and practices of memory, the question of minorities, the previously mentioned socio-political and economic system, education, mobility, and the cultural participation

of youth (Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka, 2016). As the representative of Cultural Center Rex continues while reflecting on its actions at the end of the 1990s: “We wanted to create spaces of confusion. One of the titles of our programmes was to ‘place truth in the sun’”.

Such an urge to create spaces for critical engagement is still – almost three decades after the conflicts of the 1990s – at the centre of the work of most grassroots cultural organizations. Democratic backsliding, growing authoritarianism, and a decrease in civil liberties, combined with new waves of privatizations (Bieber and Kmezić, 2017; Bieber, 2020; Solveig and Wunsch, 2020; Tomašević et al., 2018, p.66) reinforced the call for the establishment of spaces in which alternatives could be shown. One could argue that in their efforts to safeguard spaces for critical engagement, cultural actors themselves have started to take up a particular space within their societies, but also in the region at large. When asked why they decided to engage in cultural activism, the majority of the grassroots cultural actors referred to the inevitability of engaging in it. It stemmed from the immediate need to safeguard the space in which they could continue to invest in what they believed in. As a representative of KIOSK, an art organization from Belgrade, argued: “because of what we stand for and the activities we develop, we are automatically drawn into the independent cultural scene. There is no alternative so we need to protect this space”. Indeed, many interviewees argued that since the governments do not invest in spaces for alternative engagement, the grassroots cultural actors have to make sure to maintain that space themselves. Responding to a feeling of non-belonging within their own countries, they create their own public spaces of belonging and counteract state-led politics of belonging which limit the inclusivity of public space. It resembles the observation made by Głowacka-Grajper et al. (this volume) that belonging can become an important discursive tool that allows groups to negotiate their presence in social space and life.

One could argue that these efforts of grassroots cultural actors depict what Bloch has called “concrete utopias”: concrete action towards the anticipation of the not-yet (1959/1986, pp.196–197). For example, many attempts have been made to develop alternative forms of governance despite the difficulties to change existing structures. In Belgrade, Magacin, a self-organized and self-managed cultural centre, has been established in an abandoned factory and manages to function outside of governmental structures.<sup>4</sup> In Skopje, cultural centre JADRO hopes to bridge the civic and the public sector by means of installing a hybrid cultural institution trying to decentralize power in the field of culture.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, several projects focus on those themes and topics overlooked or heavily influenced by the interference of the state. These projects challenge the official politics and practices of memory, the marginalization of groups in society, the dysfunctional socio-political and economic systems, and the historical revisionism such as the repression of the Yugoslav past (see also Dragičević-Šešić, 2018; Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka, 2016). For example, Crvena (culture and art centre, Sarajevo) developed an online “Archive of Antifascist Struggle of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia”; KIOSK (art

association, Belgrade) made the exhibition “Projekat Jugoslavia” highlighting the relevance of the Yugoslav past for contemporary societies, and Krokodil (literature association, Belgrade) launched a project for critical debate counteracting current practices of historical revisionism in the region: “Who started all this? Historians against revisionism”. While in the current conditions the actions of grassroots cultural actors might be considered utopic because local policymakers generally ignore these actions (Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka, 2016), they provide indispensable windows of change. In the words of a cultural expert from Serbia: “Even though these independent cultural actors remain at the margins – only a few are not ‘captured’ by the state – their very existence shows that it is possible to do things in some other way”.

### ***Coming to terms with international frames for participation***

In their attempts to preserve and create those spaces for alternative engagement, the grassroots cultural actors make use of international funding schemes. These schemes are a means to continue efforts to fight domination and to use culture and art as a form of prefigurative politics (cf. Graeber, 2009). This transforms these funding schemes into powerful tools for socio-economic change – which has been also recognized by the funders themselves. In the 1990s, it was particularly the Open Society Fund that saw investments in civil society organizations in post-socialist contexts as an important instrument for democratic change. Grants were provided to strengthen a more unified civil society voice in the region and to create a critical mass of people who could contribute to democratic change. In the words of Paul Stubbs: “What Soros’ Open Society Foundations created in the post-Yugoslav space, in a very short period of time, was a shift from ‘resistance is futile’ to ‘resistance can be well-funded’” (2013, pp.120). Typical of the Soros funding schemes was that it invested in local networks and resources to stimulate the development of local infrastructures. It provided local actors with considerable autonomy, with the idea to reform the sector from the bottom up. However, this turned out to be rather problematic because public institutions did not want to engage in projects under the Soros label as this was deemed too political (Sretenović, 2017). As a result – and this holds valid for all countries in Southeast as well as Central and Eastern Europe – two parallel worlds emerged: the civic sector supported by international funding schemes and the public sector supported by the government. Up to the present day, both worlds remain largely separated.

While the Open Society Fund was one of the first to arrive, in the early 2000s several other international funding schemes found their way to the region to help it rebuild its societies, which led to a boost of several projects developed by the independent cultural scenes. Most of the interviewed independent cultural organizations that started their actions at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s mentioned this period of abundant funding as an exceptional period. This was the period in which the European integration process of the region commenced and many funders aimed to contribute to the required democratic



change. As a representative from KIOSK Belgrade argued: “It seems that in early 2000s, we were living in a bubble. Funding was omnipresent and we thought that everything in the future would be better. Space was provided for us independent cultural actors and we occupied this space”. The funding schemes thus helped in the establishment of an independent cultural scene. However, international funding also started to change the cultural sector. Compliance with Western forms of management led to an “NGO-ization” of the work of grassroots cultural actors: “a shift away from experience-oriented movement politics toward goal- and intervention-oriented strategies” (Lang, 1997, p.116) combined with an increasing bureaucratization and institutionalization of practices (Alvarez, 1998, p.295).

When from around 2005 onwards many international cultural funders left the region and started to fund projects elsewhere in the world, the countries were left with a large group of independent cultural actors that could not rely on state funding. Moreover, these actors increasingly started to realize that the funding schemes had only provided them with short-term solutions which could not change the persisting problems that they were facing. In these circumstances, the grassroots cultural actors struggled with the tricky balance between the need to appeal to international funding bodies and the realities on the ground (see also Naeff et al., 2020, p.96). It resulted in a lively debate about the advantages and downsides of international funding as the criteria of the international funding schemes did not always match local concerns. Many of the independent cultural organizations particularly started to act against the more neoliberal style of governance advocated in the funding schemes which they saw as another expression of the international push to capitalist models, which has been one of the main reasons why transition processes in their own local settings failed (see also Horvat and Štikš, 2014, p.10).

Participation in the Creative Europe programme – one of the few funding schemes in the field of culture which is still available – is strongly influenced by this interdependency of grassroots cultural actors of international funding schemes and determines the debate about the merits as well as downsides of these schemes. Many interviewees insisted that funding schemes should not compromise the main principles of their organization. In the words of a representative of Crvena, an association for culture and art in Sarajevo, “We have to make sure that we are not a subject to either international organisations or to our local governments, which force us to make ourselves move away from the principles we advocate”. Nor should these schemes mean precariousness for those who engage in the funded projects. Many of the interviewed independent cultural actors decided not to engage in the Creative Europe programme because they consider it too risky. The discrepancies between local conditions and European demands frequently mean that the cultural actors lose more than they gain from participating in these projects (see also Vos, 2022, pp.748–749). As such, participating in the Creative Europe programme is on the one hand indispensable; on the other hand, it is a reason for concern.

This entanglement with international funding schemes reveals a double sense of non-belonging amongst grassroots cultural actors in their participation in the EU Creative Europe programme. On the one hand, they need the funding to create spaces of belonging that are under threat in their local context. On the other hand, participation in these funding schemes also confirms their non-belonging to the European cultural space which is determined by rules and regulations – and thus frames for participation – that frequently conflict with the conditions in which they work and to some extent also with the principles they advocate.

### ***Manoeuvring between the European and the post-Yugoslav cultural space***

This double sense of non-belonging cannot be separated from the intersection of the European cultural space with another space: the post-Yugoslav space. This intersection reflects the positionality of the grassroots cultural actors as being situated at the margins of the European cultural space due to their affiliation with the post-Yugoslav space which determines their political and economic position in Europe. While the Creative Europe programme has been opened to non-EU states to confirm the future prospect of the region becoming part of the European political community, in their efforts the grassroots cultural actors are continuously reminded to catch up with the rest of Europe. In the words of Marina Blagojević-Hughson:

by being treated as being both different from and like the rest of Europe they have become Europe's semi-periphery. They can only become fully integrated if they implement policy measures which should help them to adjust to the centre and to speed up their modernisation.

(Blagojević, 2009, pp.98–99)

This feeling of being part of Europe's semi-periphery becomes most evident in the grassroots cultural organizations' attempts to comply with the requirements of funding schemes, which reflects the NGO-ization previously discussed. Successful participation in these schemes depends on the ability to work with the rules of the liberal-rights and market economy framework (see Lafont de Sentenac, 2019, p.6; Kappler and Richmond, 2011, p.265). This urge to comprehend EU frameworks of cultural management inevitably leads to divisions amongst cultural actors in the region. Larger and more experienced cultural organizations have the availability of skilled people (often trained abroad), are part of international networks, and are capable of framing the programmes in such ways that local as well as international agendas can be addressed. As such these organizations are leading in the field of international cultural cooperation within their national settings.

However, being successful applicants for the EU funding schemes, and thus being regional forerunners, does not necessarily make these cultural actors equal

players in the European cultural playfield. Compared to their fellow European partners – of which most are based in the western part of the EU – they still fall behind in terms of access to resources and possibilities to effectively translate the international funding requirements within the national institutional context (see Vos, 2022, pp.748–750). This confirms the semi-peripheral position of the participants in the EU funding schemes described by Blagojević-Hughson. On the one hand, the participants have proven that they are capable of partaking in EU projects; on the other hand, the socio-economic and political conditions typical for the wider post-Yugoslav context limit full engagement. The “semi-otherness” the cultural actors experience in their partnerships in the Creative Europe programme creates ambivalence regarding their participation in the European cultural space in their simultaneous opposition and acceptance, imitation, and rejection of this space (Blagojević, 2009, p.99).

The intersection of the European space with the post-Yugoslav space also has a more positive connotation and reflects the ways in which grassroots cultural actors identify with and instrumentalize the post-Yugoslav space for a variety of purposes. Many interviewees underscored the richness of being part of the post-Yugoslav space which as they argue can complement current connotations of the European cultural space. In particular, those organizations that had been already active before Yugoslavia fell apart emphasize the value of the strong ties amongst cultural organizations in the post-Yugoslav space. They mention the naturalness of cooperating with fellow cultural actors in the region as the contexts in which they work are very similar. As a representative of the organization *Ministarstvo Prostora*, an activist collective which focuses on the use of urban space in Belgrade, argued:

sure there are differences, but we speak the same language, we have inherited the same laws, and unfortunately even the political situation is getting more similar all across the region. In these circumstances we can learn from each other and be inspired.

Indeed, many examples can be found in which networks between cultural actors in the region have been crucial in the development of initiatives. All over ex-Yugoslavia, social movements have emerged such as *Right to the City ... in Zagreb* and *Don't Drown Belgrade ... in Serbia* (see Štiks, 2015, p.138). These movements closely collaborate and all have their origins in the independent cultural scenes of their countries. This networking has led to the establishment of *Kooperativa* in 2012, a regional platform for culture that aims to create a long-term and sustainable framework for cooperation and development of independent cultural organizations in Southeast Europe.<sup>6</sup>

This engagement with the post-Yugoslav space which exposes feelings of transnational belonging based on social, cultural, and historical affinity can be recognized in a whole series of projects of which quite a few have also been supported by the Creative Europe programme. Some of these focus particularly on

the memory and heritage of this particular period. They use international funding schemes to display Yugoslav history and memory in the public sphere while the different post-Yugoslav governments foreground the national interpretations of the past. An example of this is the project *Heroes We Love ...* which focused on the largely forgotten socialist art from Southeast Europe. Others – such as the PopArt Festival of Pogon in Sarajevo – refer to the post-Yugoslav space to create awareness amongst young generations of the rich cultural scene that marked Yugoslavia. With their projects, they hope to inspire these young generations and remind them that there was a different life before the period of failed transition commenced. Additionally, old and often abandoned Yugoslav factories, houses of culture, cinemas, and art galleries have been provided with new life and redeveloped to merge Yugoslav legacies with new future purposes. For example, *Ministarstvo Prostora* occupied a series of cinemas and developed a street gallery transforming abandoned spaces into new cultural centres in Belgrade. In Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the organization *Revizor* has transformed a deserted socialist factory into *KRAK*, an independent space for contemporary cultural practice. Finally, many grassroots cultural organizations draw on Yugoslav legacies to reaffirm negated and marginalized socialist values to counteract the socio-political situation and particularly the capitalist transformation and conservative-nationalist ideologies (Štikš, 2020, p.464). In these projects, Yugoslavia is often a starting point behind discussions held in public spaces. For example, independent theatre companies such as the *Dah Theatre* and the *Mostar Youth Theatre* developed a series of performances that deal with remembering Yugoslavia and the traumas of the wars and how this impacts on the present. All of this reveals that emphasizing shared Yugoslav legacies has become an act of resistance in itself. EU cultural funding is one of the means to continue the use of culture and art to unify different groups of people and stimulate critical thinking in the post-Yugoslav context.

### **Multiple entanglements: establishing a place in the European cultural space**

What became clear is that the interpretation of the European cultural space from a Southeast European perspective is inevitably influenced by what happens in the overlapping social, cultural, and political spaces of its participants and the nature of participation in those spaces (see also Massey, 2005). For grassroots cultural organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia, circumstances typical for their local spaces – resistance against persisting political and economic structures, dependency on international funding schemes, and affiliation with the post-Yugoslav space – have impacted on what is happening in the other space, the European cultural space. What do these multiple entanglements mean for the processes of space-making and belonging brought about by EU-funded cultural initiatives in Southeast Europe?

First – which is related to the previously discussed position of the grassroots cultural actors as guardians of spaces of creativity and free thought – for most

grassroots cultural organizations in Southeast Europe, the European cultural space is primarily seen as the context in which local change can be brought about. This foregrounding of regional concerns breaks with the way in which the EU presents its cultural policy, namely that “Europe’s rich cultural heritage and dynamic cultural and creative sectors strengthen European identity, creating a sense of belonging” (European Commission, 2018, p.1). Senses of belonging are indeed brought about, but only when these are of particular relevance within the local context of Southeast Europe. If anything, the grassroots cultural organizations use the Creative Europe programme to protect spaces of creativity within their own local settings, which happen to be located in the wider European cultural space. This proves what has also been observed by Randall Halle in his work on the EU media subprogramme, that the Creative Europe programme creates its own localized spaces that contravene state authority and distant interests (Halle, 2014, p.9). These localized spaces complement the European cultural space, but frequently foreground local concerns – and thus local notions of belonging – instead of European ones.

Second, for grassroots cultural organizations in Southeast Europe, the European cultural space embodies dependency and asymmetrical power relations related to their affiliation to the post-Yugoslav space. While the EU represents the European cultural space as a space in which new forms of European belonging can emerge, the strong dependency on international funding schemes and the challenging conditions in which the grassroots cultural actors work frequently place them in the position of outsiders. For many of the participating organizations, engaging in EU-funded cultural projects means being confronted with their spatial marginality which relates to the social, economic, and political conditions of the national settings of which they form a part (see also Vos, 2022). As such – and this breaks with the official narrative of the EU – participation in the Creative Europe programme does not necessarily mean experiencing what connects them to other Europeans; rather it confirms what sets them apart. The so-called NGO-ization caused by the dependency on international funding schemes is largely seen as a negative outcome of the asymmetrical power relations which confirm that the socio-political space of the region has been largely ascribed from outside (Stubbs, 2015, p.71). In the specific case of EU funding and the Creative Europe programme, the European cultural space has become associated with bureaucracy, neoliberalization, and even to some extent with the failed post-socialist transition process which is seen by many as at least partly a result of EU enlargement strategies.

Third, there is a shared conviction amongst grassroots cultural actors in Southeast Europe that the historical, social, and cultural dimensions of the post-Yugoslav space deserve a place in the wider European cultural space. While the socialist past has found its way into EU cultural policymaking and particularly its heritage programmes,<sup>7</sup> grassroots cultural organizations in Southeast Europe – but also in other post-socialist states – argue that several of the legacies of the socialist period deserve attention for multiple reasons. In the words of a representative of Pogon, an NGO focusing on youth and culture in Sarajevo, “The war re-set

everything and we urgently need to regain what we have lost. Yugoslavia's cultural richness reminds us that we have so much to contribute to the European and Western culture scene". He referred to the music, architecture, literature, theatre, and arts scene of the former Yugoslavia which has become forgotten due to the conflicts of the 1990s and the period of nationalization that followed. As many interviewees argued, Yugoslav culture currently has no place in the European cultural space leaving out a considerable part of European culture. This impacts negatively on the attempts made to develop a shared cultural frame of reference for all Europeans. If the European Union's politics of belonging – and thus the ways in which it discursively constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2006) – does not include Europe's socialist past, this will inevitably lead to feelings of non-belonging as the participants from Southeast Europe become marginal subjectivities of these politics (see Harris and Gandolfo, 2014, p.574; Trudeau, 2006, p.423).

Furthermore, this aligns with this call for attention to Yugoslavia's rich cultural history; the post-Yugoslav space seems to be a good starting point behind transnational cooperation and exchange in the field of culture and art which is indispensable for the objectives the European Commission has set for EU cultural initiatives in Southeast Europe: fostering reconciliation, establishing inclusive, democratic societies, and countering radicalization (European Commission, 2016, p.6). By investing in concrete utopias all over the region, projects co-funded by the Creative Europe programme actually facilitate processes that the EU aims to bring about in its enlargement policies and in its strategy for culture in international relations. This reflects the European Commission's hope that cultural interaction and exchange processes can be instigated that impact positively on European integration processes. However, it is important to realize that it was not the EU that started this process. These changes were instigated by the independent cultural scenes in Southeast Europe way before the opening of the Creative Europe programme. Grassroots cultural organizations tactically used their strong networks and international funding schemes to translate their ideas into practices which suited their needs.

## Conclusion

By means of its cultural initiatives, the EU aims to create a cultural space in which EU citizens and citizens of its (potential) candidate states are invited to participate which will hopefully lead to new forms of belonging to the European community. However, typical for EU action in the field of culture is that the EU can only to a degree govern its cultural space and set the frames for participation, which leaves room for negotiation amongst the participants to use the funding according to their own particular concerns. While both the EU and the grassroots cultural actors aim to use the funds to instigate new forms of belonging, the forms of belonging that are brought in the implementation of the Creative Europe programme reveal several reversals of the kinds of belonging that the EU intended to

establish. While the EU assumes that belonging to the European community will automatically emerge from the participation it facilitates, in their encounters with the Creative Europe programme, participants from Southeast Europe frequently experienced a double sense of non-belonging. Furthermore, the kinds of belonging brought forward by the funded projects did not reveal consensus, but rather disparity about the European dimension of the European cultural space and feelings of marginality amongst the Southeast European participants.

What became clear is that for many grassroots cultural actors, participating in the Creative Europe programme is not so much about increasing European belonging or belonging to the European community. Instead, for them, participation means finding new possibilities to develop and maintain alternative forms of belonging within their own regional, national, and local contexts. In line with this, the European cultural space is inseparable from the other space they are part of: the post-Yugoslav space. The intersection of these two spaces impacts on the potential of the Creative Europe programme to stimulate identification with the European community within this specific context. For many grassroots cultural actors, participation in the Creative Europe programme does not necessarily lead to more identification with other Europeans. Instead, it confirms their position of being part of Europe's semi-periphery and thus being both different from and like the rest of Europe. Remarkably, many grassroots cultural actors make use of the Creative Europe programme because they feel they do not belong both in their local contexts and in Europe at large. They invest in new spaces of belonging within their own local contexts to maintain what they fear losing. But they also make a plea to the EU for more attention to the post-Yugoslav space in its cultural initiatives: how to fully belong to the European cultural space, when the post-Yugoslav space – which is central to the notions of belonging of the cultural actors from Southeast Europe – remains at the margins of this space.

What this analysis shows is that grassroots cultural actors renegotiate the European cultural space extending its meaning and interpretation. This can be seen as a direct result of encounters created by means of the Creative Europe programme which in the specific case of Southeast Europe has been largely determined by the entanglement of two spaces: the European and the post-socialist space. The entanglement of both spaces places the grassroots cultural actors in an in-between position. On the one hand, they are part of both spaces as citizens and participants. On the other hand, they remain excluded from both spaces, acting as independent cultural actors that operate at the margins of the European community. For them, international funding schemes are a means to actively negotiate their position both in their local and in the European context, counteracting several instances of non-belonging.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks all interviewees in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia for generously sharing their insights about

participating in the Creative Europe programme. The research was made possible due to funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 769478. The project *en/counter/points: (re)negotiating belonging through culture and contact in public space and place* is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme ([www.heranet.info](http://www.heranet.info)) which is co-funded by AHRC, MIUR, NCN, NWO, BMBF, and the European Commission through Horizon 2020.

## Notes

- 1 Southeast Europe refers to the countries that were once part of the former Yugoslavia. The research has been carried out in three countries and does not represent Southeast Europe in its entirety. Yet, these countries share quite a few historical, cultural, and socio-political features with the other post-Yugoslav states and face similar challenges related to the unfinished transition processes after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Southeast Europe is preferred over the term Western Balkans due to the historical and political connotations of the term.
- 2 Most of these interviews were held in 2018 and 2020. Due to COVID-19, the interviews in 2020 were held online. The grassroots organizations that were interviewed represent a variety of sectors – i.e., theatre, performative arts, contemporary and visual art, modern dance, literature, and architecture – sizes, and periods of existence. Most of them are based in the capital cities (Sarajevo, Skopje, and Belgrade) while others are based in other towns and cities (Banja Luka, Mostar, Bitola, and Novi Sad). Some of them act as cultural centres assembling different forms of culture and art. A full list with all details can be requested by contacting the author of this chapter.
- 3 For the priorities for the period 2019–2024 see: <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policies/strategic-framework-eus-cultural-policy>, last accessed May 2021.
- 4 See <https://kcmagacin.org/en/in-short/>, last accessed June 2021.
- 5 Based on models that were already successfully developed in Croatia by organizations such as Clubture and the Kultura Nova Foundation in Zagreb: <https://jadroasocijacija.org.mk/?lang=en>, last accessed February 2022.
- 6 See <https://platforma-kooperativa.org/>, last accessed April 2022.
- 7 Several post-Soviet states demanded attention to the legacies of the Stalinist period, arguing that this period deserves a similar status in European memory narratives as the Holocaust. This led to the European Parliament's 2009 resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism, condemning totalitarian crimes and recognizing "Communism, Nazism and fascism as a shared legacy" (European Parliament, 2009).

## References

- Alvarez, S.E. (1998) 'Latin American feminisms 'go global': Trends of the 1990s and challenges for the new millennium', in Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, E. and Escobar, A. (eds.) *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American social movements*, Boulder: Westview.
- Anthias, F. (2013) 'Moving beyond the Janus face of integration and diversity discourses: Towards an intersectional framing', *The Sociological Review*, 61, pp. 323–343.



- Antonsich, M. (2010) 'Searching for belonging: An analytical framework', *Geography Compass*, 4 (6), pp. 644–659.
- Bieber, F. (2020) *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bieber, F. and Kmezić, M. (2017) *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Autonomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of the EU Democracy Promotion*. Belgrade: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Blagojević, M. (2009) *Knowledge Production at the Semiperiphery: A Gender Perspective*. Belgrade: Institute for Sociological and Criminological Research.
- Bloch, E. (1959/1986) *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Cornwall, A. (2002) 'Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development.' *IDS Working Paper 170*, pp. 1–35.
- Čukić, I. and Timotijević, J. (2020) *Spaces of commoning: urban commons in the ex-YU region*. Belgrade: Ministry of Space: Institute for Urban Politics, Belgrade.
- Dragičević-Šešić, M. (2018) *Umetnost i Kultura Otpora*. Belgrade: Clio.
- Dragičević-Šešić, M. and Tomka, G. (2016) 'Art and dissent. Questioning the grid', in Gonçalves, S. and Majhanović, S. (eds) *Art and Intercultural Dialogue*. New York: Springer, pp. 55–86.
- European Commission (2016) 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations', Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2016%3A29%3AFIN> (accessed 17 November 2020).
- European Commission (2018) 'A new European agenda for culture', Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2018:267:FIN> (accessed 10 December 2020).
- European Parliament (2009) 'European conscience and totalitarianism. European Parliament resolution of 2 April 2009 on European conscience and totalitarianism', Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2009-0213\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2009-0213_EN.html) (accessed 23 April 2022).
- European Parliament and the Council (2006) 'Decision No 1855/2006/EC of the European parliament and of the council of 12 december 2006 establishing the culture programme' (2007 to 2013). *Official Journal of the European Union L*, 372, pp. 1–11.
- Graeber, D. (2009) *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Halle, R. (2014) *The Europeanization of Cinema: Interzones and Imaginative Communities*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Habermas, J. (1984) *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 1, trans. T. McCarthy*. Boston: Beacon.
- Habermas, J. (1990) *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. Lenhardt and S. Weber Nicholson., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2015) 'Democracy in Europe: Why the development of the EU into a transnational democracy is necessary and how it is possible', *European Law Journal*, 21(4), pp. 546–557. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12128>.
- Harris, A. and Gandolfo, E. (2014) 'Looked at and looked over or: I wish I was adopted', *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 21(5), pp. 567–581.
- Horvat, S. and Štiks, I. (2014) *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism. Radical Politics After Yugoslavia*. London: Verso.
- Kappler, S. and Richmond, O. (2011) 'Peacebuilding and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Resistance or emancipation?' *Security Dialogue*, 42(3), pp. 261–78.

- Karaça, B. (2009) 'Governance of or through culture? Cultural policy and the politics of culture in Europe', *Focaal*, 55(14), pp. 27–40.
- Lafont de Sentenac, D. (2019) 'United in Growing Diversity. How the EU takes intercultural relations into account in its Western Balkans enlargement policy.' Policy Paper No. 229, Jacques Delors Institute, pp. 1–18.
- Lähdesmäki, T. (2014) 'Transnational heritage in the making. Strategies for narrating cultural heritage as European in the intergovernmental initiative of the European heritage label.' *Ethnologia Europaea: Journal of European Ethnology*, 44(1), pp. 75–93.
- Lähdesmäki, T. (2017) 'Politics of affect in the EU heritage policy discourse: An analysis of promotional videos of sites awarded with the European heritage label.' *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23(8), pp. 709–22.
- Lähdesmäki, T., Mäkinen, K., Čeginskas, V., and Kaasik-Krogerus, S. (2021) *Europe from Below. Notions of Europe and the European among Participants of EU Cultural Initiatives*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lang, S. (1997) 'The NGOization of feminism', in Scott, J.W., Kaplan, C., and Keates, D. (eds) *Transitions, Environments, Translations. Feminisms in International Politics*. London: Routledge, pp. 101–120.
- Littoz-Monnet, A. (2012) 'Agenda-setting dynamics at the EU level: The case of the EU cultural policy', *Journal of European Integration*, 34(5), pp. 505–522.
- Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Naeff J.A., Ree A. van, Sipkes L., Strava C., Tromp K. and Westmoreland M.R. (2020), 'Dissonant entanglements and creative redistributions', In Kuoni C., Baltà Portolés J., Khan N.N. and Moses S. (eds.) *Forces of Art: Perspectives from a Changing World*. Amsterdam: Valiz, pp. 71–96.
- Shore, C. (2006) 'In uno plures (?): EU cultural policy and the governance of Europe.' *Cultural Analysis*, 5, pp. 7–26.
- Solveig, R. and Wunsch, N. (2020) 'Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1, pp.41–62.
- Štikš I. (2015) "'New left" in the post-Yugoslav space: Issues, sites, and forms', *Socialism and Democracy*, 29(3), pp. 135–146.
- Štikš, I. (2020) 'Activist aesthetics in the post-socialist Balkans', *Third Text* 34(4–5), pp. 461–79.
- Sretenović, D. (2017) 'Interview with Dejan Sretenović on the role of Soros Centers for Contemporary Art - SCCA in the region and the conditions of art production in the 90s.' Available at: <https://www.kuda.org/en/interview-dejan-sretenovi-role-soros-centers-contemporary-art-scca-region-and-conditions-art> (last accessed 19-05-2021).
- Stubbs, P. (2013) 'Flex actors and philanthropy in (post-)conflict Arenas: Soros' open society foundations in the post-Yugoslav space', *Croatian Political Science Review*, 50(5), pp. 114–138.
- Stubbs, P. (2015) 'Performing reform in South East Europe: Consultancy, translation and flexible agency'. In: Clarke, J. Bainton, D., Lendvai, N. and Stubbs, P. (eds.) *Making Policy Mover. Towards a politics of translation and assemblage*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 65–94.
- Tomašević, T., Horvat, V., Midžić, A., Dragšić, I. and Dakić, M. (2018) *Commons in South East Europe. Case of Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Macedonia*. Zagreb: Institute for Political Ecology.

- Trudeau, D. (2006) 'Politics of belonging in the construction of landscapes: Place-making, boundary drawing and exclusion', *Cultural Geographies*, 13(3), pp. 421–443.
- Vos, C. (2017) 'European integration through "soft conditionality". The contribution of culture to EU enlargement in Southeast Europe.' *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 23(6), pp. 675–89.
- Vos, C. (2022) 'Moving in and out of the European cultural space. South East European encounters with the creative Europe programme', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(2), pp. 740–760.
- Yuval-Davies, N. (2011) *The Politics of Belonging. Intersectional Contestations*. London: Sage.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006) 'Belonging and the politics of belonging.' *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40 (3), pp. 197–214.