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Vos, C.

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Moving in and out of the European cultural space: Southeast European encounters with the Creative Europe programme

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Claske Vos** 

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

In 2014, the European Commission opened the Creative Europe programme to non-European Union states. In doing so, their intention was to provide cultural actors outside the European Union with the opportunity of engaging in a larger European cultural space, leading to new forms of European belonging. This article examines the functioning of this programme in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia, and it analyses what forms of belonging emerged in the process. After revealing the reasons behind engaging in the programme and mapping experiences of participation, the article concludes that the programme is not only an opportunity to (re)connect with the larger European community, but for many participants it is also a form of confrontation with persisting inequalities and their marginal position within Europe. Their experience of participating in the European cultural space is directly tied to the overlapping social, cultural and political spaces of which they are part. This confirms Lefebvre's analysis that spaces are inseparable and that newly created spaces cannot be emptied of traces of social relations in other spaces.

Keywords

Belonging, Creative Europe programme, cultural spaces, EU, South East Europe

Corresponding author:

Claske Vos, Department of European Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: c.vos@uva.nl

Introduction

Strengthened cultural cooperation with the EU's partners can help open the 'European cultural space' to new cultural players and audiences.

– European Commission (2016: 10)

As stated in this Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations, the European Commission sees cultural cooperation as a means of giving cultural actors from non-European Union (EU) countries access to the so-called European cultural space. The EU invests in cultural cooperation outside the EU because of culture's assigned value as 'a vector of identity and cohesion, a driver of socio-economic development, and a factor directly nurturing peaceful relations' (European Commission, 2018: 7). This EU strategy for international cultural relations is rather recent.¹ Yet, EU cultural engagement in (potential) candidate countries has a longer history.

From 1989 onwards, the EU provided (potential) candidate countries with funding schemes for culture as part of its enlargement strategy. These programmes have been financed by a budget from the Directorate-General for Culture and Education (DG-EAC) and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR). Consequently, the EU policy objectives of both fields – culture and enlargement – have become entangled (Vos, 2017). The European Commission's most recent activity in this domain has been to allow (potential) candidate countries to take part in the Creative Europe's funding schemes. The Creative Europe programme, which is part of the European Commission's DG-EAC, was launched in 2014 and is the most important EU funding instrument in the field of culture and media (European Parliament and the Council, 2013). The European Commission hopes that by allowing (potential) candidate countries access to this programme, social cohesion and identification with the EU, as well as transnational cooperation and economic growth, can be stimulated (Vos, 2017).

Whether these EU initiatives indeed stimulate identification with the EU and help (potential) candidate states with their EU-integration processes is questionable. A recent policy brief on cultural cooperation in South East Europe argues that the Creative Europe programme 'presents the potential for creating a space for people-to-people contact, co-creation, and mutual understanding' (Cvetičanin and Stefanović, 2019: 5). At first glance, these observations support the EU's belief that cultural cooperation can be a 'vector of identity and cohesion'. However, the policy brief also discusses the multiple obstacles that cultural organisations and institutions face, and questions the sustainability of such spaces of mutual understanding (Cvetičanin and Stefanović, 2019).

This article further investigates the aforementioned potential of the Creative Europe programme to bring about new forms of belonging in South East Europe.² First, it does so by examining how the EU depicts the European cultural space and what role it assigns to the Creative Europe programme in producing this space. For this purpose, official EU policy documents representing EU cultural policy – which can be considered an implicit policy in its adherence to the subsidiarity principle – are examined by means of a discourse analysis on the notion of the European cultural space. Second, it maps the reasons why organisations and institutions working in the fields of culture and arts in South East Europe participate in the Creative Europe programme. Semi-structured qualitative

interviews were completed with 43 cultural organisations and institutions, policymakers and cultural experts in 2016 and 2018. Of these 43 interviews, 28 were completed with cultural actors who had been successful in obtaining EU funding within Creative Europe's Culture sub-programme.³ Moreover, five interviews were held with cultural organisations and institutions that had not (yet) been successful in obtaining EU funding but had engaged in application processes and successfully obtained funding from other international funding bodies.⁴ Finally, 10 interviews were held with representatives of the Creative Europe Desks,⁵ with spokespersons of the ministries responsible for engaging with the Creative Europe programme, and with local experts with long-term experience in the cultural field in South East Europe. Third, based on interviews with successful applicants, the article focuses on what participation entails for those who participated in the Creative Europe programme. For example, what forms of belonging does the programme bring about, and do these forms of belonging overlap with those foreseen and desired by the EU?

In this examination of the EU's attempts to create a participative space of belonging, this article is inspired by the work of Lefebvre (1991) on the production of space and Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) on the intersectionality of belonging. Lefebvre (1991) argues that spaces are never neutral. Instead, he sees space as a 'social product which is not simply "there," a neutral container waiting to be filled' (p. 24). Spaces are perceived, conceived and lived, all of which impacts their functioning and main characteristics (see also Cornwall, 2002, 2004; Massey, 2005). Following Lefebvre's analysis that spaces are subject to several relations at play, one can argue that the effects of the EU's efforts to stimulate a sense of 'European belonging', by promoting a shared cultural space, remain rather unpredictable. How this EU-related 'politics of belonging' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011) is perceived, received and translated will depend on each participant's social positionality within this space and how this interrelates with other spaces of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 199–200).

In this article, South East Europe refers to (potential) candidate states from the former Yugoslavia.⁶ The research focuses on three countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia – and thus does not cover the region in its entirety. Yet, some comparisons can be made between these three countries and the other candidate states in the region. The most important binding factor is that they are all part of the post-Yugoslav space, which imbues them with a variety of historical, cultural and socio-political similarities. Moreover, they are all coping with similar challenges caused by the unfinished transition processes that followed the collapse of Yugoslavia. This shared post-socialist context has a considerable impact on the senses of belonging brought about through participation in the Creative Europe programme. Whenever differences stand out – for example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose political situation differs considerably from the rest of the region – this will be highlighted in the text.

The European cultural space as a participative space of belonging

The notion of the European cultural space or area features in many of the EU policy documents. When the European Commission uses this concept, it is almost always

presented as a way of instigating new forms of belonging in Europe. From the 1970s onwards, one of the main reasons for the commission to invest in culture was to transform the remote 'Europe of institutional structures' into a more popular 'people's Europe' (Shore, 2006: 11). As was stated in the 1985 Adonnino Report, a forerunner of EU cultural policy, 'It is through action in the areas of culture and communication, which are essential to European identity and the Community's image in the minds of its people, that support for the advancement of Europe can and must be sought' (European Commission, 1985: 21). From this early point onwards, the European Commission's premise has been that culture helps to create and to experience a shared European cultural space.

Enabling the European cultural space by staging and co-creating Europe

This belief in the interlinkage between culture and the formation of the European community has been central to EU cultural policy from its early start-up to its latest framework programme. The ways in which the EU aims to use culture to develop its participative space of belonging have taken different forms and shapes. When the EU developed its first initiatives in the field of culture, from the end of the 1980s up to 2000, politics of belonging assumed a central position. Belonging here is not so much about a personal, intimate, feeling of being 'at home' in a place; it features more as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As is stated in the first official EU programme on European Culture, titled Culture 2000, 'to bring to life the cultural area common to the European people, it is essential to encourage creative activities, promote cultural heritage with a European dimension, encourage mutual awareness of the culture and history of the peoples of Europe' (European Parliament and the Council, 2000: 2). The programmes that followed continued this line of thought (European Parliament and the Council, 2006: 1, 2013: 223). Through narrations of a European past, heritage and memory, the EU seeks to affect people's emotions and make them feel more European and connected to Europe, the EU and other Europeans (Lähdesmäki, 2017).

This 'staging of Europe' (Krumrey, 2018; Lähdesmäki, 2017, 2019) has increasingly – and particularly from 2000 onwards – been complemented with another approach that stresses the participatory characteristics of the European cultural space. Here, belonging is not generated by a particular framing and staging of Europe, but by the act of participating in cultural initiatives. Participation was already mentioned in the Culture 2000 programme, but in the next programme, Culture 2007–2013, it took centre stage (Staiger, 2013: 32). The main rationale behind this programme was to promote 'cultural and linguistic cooperation and diversity to make European citizenship a tangible reality by encouraging direct participation by European citizens in the integration process' (European Parliament and the Council, 2006: 1). This idea that participation and strengthened cooperation can instigate new forms of belonging to the European community was re-emphasised in the 2018 European Agenda for Culture, which stated that culture 'tops the list of factors most likely to create a feeling of community' and that 'there is a clear scope to increase cultural participation' (European Commission, 2018: 1–2). Culture was

presented as the ‘ideal means of communicating across language barriers, empowering people and facilitating social cohesion’ (European Commission, 2018: 1–2).

On a more practical level, this emphasis on the staging of, as well as participation in, a shared European cultural space has become integrated into the EU work plans for culture that lay out the priorities of the funding schemes for each funding period. The two work plans that cover the period of the Creative Europe programme (Work Plan for Culture 2015–2018 and Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022) emphasise the need to invest in Europe’s cultural heritage and the dissemination of European cultural content – and thus a staging of Europe – next to the need to invest in accessible and inclusive culture, the promotion of cultural diversity and mobility, the promotion of cohesion and well-being, and the development of an ecosystem supporting artists, cultural and creative professionals, gender equality and international cultural relations (Council of the EU, 2014: 5, 2018: 13). These priorities are consequently translated in the EU funding programmes. Flagship programmes, such as the European Capital of Culture and the European Heritage Label, tend to focus more on the first conceptualisation of the European cultural space and promote ‘common cultural roots, identity and shared values’ (European Parliament and the Council, 2011, 2014). EU funding programmes, such as those of the Creative Europe programme, tend to focus more on facilitating participation, exchange, access and mobility as a means of celebrating and overcoming diversity (European Agency for Culture and Education (EACEA), 2020).

Why participate? The value of the Creative Europe programme in South East Europe

In the main EU policy documents on culture, culture is presented as both the symbolic basis of and the functional means for the establishment of the European cultural space (see also Lähdesmäki et al., 2021). These two aspects of the European cultural space are also represented in the Creative Europe programme which prioritises both the demarcation of the EU as cultural community and the facilitation of increased interaction and exchange in the cultural field. However, these priorities might not overlap with those of the cultural actors who decide to participate in the programme. Returning to Lefebvre’s (1991) ideas about the production of space, even though the European cultural space, as defined by the EU and closely tied to EU notions of the European community, has socially produced boundaries – laid out in the funding requirements – it always interpenetrates and superimposes other spaces (p. 89). Hence, in order to grasp why cultural actors from South East Europe engage in the European cultural space, the other social, cultural and political spaces in which they participate need to be considered.

Safeguarding a space for cultural action in constraining socio-political contexts

The majority of the cultural actors who engage in the Creative Europe programme are part of the independent cultural scenes.⁷ For them, one of the main reasons for participation in the Creative Europe programme has been to develop cultural projects that critically reflect on and respond to the socio-political circumstances in South East Europe.

Some of these cultural actors already began these efforts at the end of the 1990s, when the first independent cultural organisations were established (Cvetičanin, 2020: 30; Dragičević-Šešić, 2018: 52). At the end of the 1990s, Yugoslavia fell apart and the independent countries entered a period of post-socialist transition resulting in a general impoverishment of the states (marked by corruption) combined with huge public and private indebtedness, widespread deindustrialisation, social degradation, depopulation and general unemployment (Horvat and Štiks, 2015). These independent cultural organisations started to act against what they perceived as the abnormalities of the post-socialist transition process. They objected against the political elites' use of nationalism for their own personal gain, the corrupt privatisation processes they instigated and the growing dysfunctionality of the political systems (see Arsenijević, 2014: 47; Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka, 2016; Hromadžić and Kurtović, 2017). There was a belief that through culture and art they could enact 'alternative futures in the aftermath of state socialist projects' (Kurtović and Sargsyan, 2019: 3). International funders facilitated these actions.⁸

In 2020, about two decades later, the socio-political situation has not improved. Some political scientists even argue that it has become worse since the 1990s, through processes of democratic backsliding, growing authoritarianism and a decrease in civil liberties (see, for example, Bieber, 2020; Bieber and Kmezić, 2017; Solveig and Wunsch, 2020). This has led to an upsurge in social and political activism all over the region.⁹ These social movements brought into question both the neoliberal capitalist transformation of post-socialist societies and the liberal democratic political system, which was judged to be corrupt and non-representative (Bieber and Brentin, 2018; Fagan and Sincar, 2017; Horvat and Štiks, 2015; Mujanović, 2018; Štiks, 2020: 462). In the words of Damir Arsenijević (2014), participants in these movements demanded an '*unbribeable life*: a life that refuses to be corrupted and bought off in the face of a politics that aims to desensitize such life in relation to the workings and effects of the terror of the corrupt privatization' (p. 47, emphasis in original). Like in the 1990s, the independent cultural organisations played a considerable role in these social movements. As became clear in the interviews with the independent actors, through their projects, they hope to break patterns of authoritarianism, censorship and revisionism and develop spaces for critical engagement that are 'shrinking' in the current socio-political context (see also Hadjievska and Založnik, 2015; Vukobrat, 2016).

What has changed since the 1990s is that many of the international funds that were available in the 1990s and early 2000s drastically decreased, while state funding in the region has remained limited. In these circumstances of financial scarcity, the Creative Europe programme has become one of the few sources of income and support for the (progressive) cultural sector, using culture to counteract local circumstances. This is reflected in quite a few of the projects that are supported by the programme that try to tackle topics such as historical revisionism, the unsolved traumas of the Yugoslav wars, migration, minorities, intercultural conflict and memories of the socialist past.¹⁰ The projects reflect the need to use culture to address the current socio-political circumstances in South East Europe (see also Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka, 2016). In addition, another series of projects aims to introduce more democratic models of cultural management, resist patterns of clientelism and centralisation, and advocate more critical approaches to

culture.¹¹ Hence, the Creative Europe programme is one of the means for these cultural actors to continue their attempts to change state patterns of governance through culture.

Of course, not all participants in the Creative Europe programme are part of the independent cultural scene and not all organisations within this scene consider themselves cultural activists. As Cvetičanin (2020) pointed out in his recent study of the independent cultural scenes in South East Europe, there is a considerable group within these scenes that is entirely dedicated to the aesthetic aspects of cultural creation and to aesthetic experiments (p. 21). Members of this group of independent cultural actors engage in the Creative Europe programme because it provides them with a means to gain international recognition, exhibit, find inspiration, fuel creativity and discover new ways of expression.¹² Such an urge to engage in international networking, and artistic mobility is central to the work of artists all over the world as it helps in the process of creative production (see Duester, 2013; Kiwan and Meinhof, 2011; Kobolt, 2008; Mendolicchio, 2013; Toplak, 2017: 76). Typically, South East Europe has faced a long period of isolation due to the conflicts that broke out in several parts of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and has faced many obstacles in the EU integration process that followed. This has made international networking even more urgent.

Another important aspect of transnational cooperation in South East Europe is that many cultural actors – including cultural activists and some public institutions¹³ – want to revive the post-Yugoslav space. As stated by a representative of the Albanian Theatre in Skopje that participated in the project (Re)Discovering Europe,¹⁴ ‘After the conflicts of the 1990s we lost our international profile and had to fight for our position here in Skopje. Just the fact that we can experience again the feeling of speaking the same cultural language is wonderful’.¹⁵ Many cultural actors hope to restore the supra-ethnic and transnational political, cultural and economic ties that were interrupted by the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars that followed (see Judah, 2009). Transnational cooperation, therefore, does not only mean widening international networks. It is also an act of resistance in itself which has been advocated by many independent cultural actors. Insisting on regional cooperation means breaking with the nationalist agendas of the national governments that are still being implemented 20 years after the fall of Yugoslavia (see Hromadžić, 2015).

As already described, a relatively small proportion of the applicants are public institutions. These public institutions engage in the Creative Europe programme because the budget they receive from the state is not sufficient to cover all their expenses – particularly for international projects.¹⁶ This holds especially true for the public institutions that represent sectors that are not considered to be as relevant as others, by their national governments, such as modern dance, socially engaged theatre and performative arts; it is also true of those institutions that represent parts of the past that the national governments would rather forget. For example, the Museum of Yugoslavia in Serbia and the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which both represent the socialist past, have been neglected by their national governments for a long time. When the museums became public institutions, the directors of the museums were regularly pressured by their national governments to use their collections to interpret socialism through a national lens or to revise parts of the country’s socialist history. International funding allowed the museums to represent the history of Yugoslavia – and thus to take a wider

regional perspective – and to develop exhibitions about themes and topics of this historical period, often not supported by the state.¹⁷

Public institutions that take rather innovative approaches to culture also regularly engage in the Creative Europe programme. In Serbia, for example, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) and the Centre for the Promotion of Science (CPN) managed to obtain funding for the Creative Europe programme with two projects that aim to connect music and quantum physics. Meanwhile, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the International Theatre Festival Sarajevo (MESS) successfully applied for the Creative Europe Programme with two programmes that invested in socially engaged forms of theatre on the topic of migration. Both the theatre genre and the topic are generally not supported by the responsible cultural institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁸ The long-term experience of these public institutions with international funding and strong international networks – which is not common for public institutions in the region – makes them successful applicants.

What unifies the different actors participating in the Creative Europe programme – independent as well as public actors – is their ambition to move beyond traditional approaches to culture and art. In many ways, they are pioneers within their state settings as they dare leave the beaten track. Their rather innovative approach has not been supported by national governments resulting in a dependency on international funding. An increasing rift has emerged between the national governments and these innovative actors in the field of culture. As illustrated by a representative of the DAH Theatre, an independent theatre troupe in Belgrade which was the first organisation in Serbia to receive funding from the EU in the field of culture (see Dragičević-Šešić and Tomka 2016: 6),

We act as the cultural ambassadors of Serbia because in our international projects we are actually Serbia's cultural face to the rest of the world. Yet we do not have an actual stage where we rehearse and perform our theatre productions. Only through international support do we manage to survive.¹⁹

Or in the words of one of the representatives of Lokomotiva, a non-profit cultural organisation in Skopje, 'We see international cooperation as a window of opportunity, but we feel completely isolated from our local context'.²⁰ While for the participants in the Creative Europe programme international cooperation is commonplace, this is not self-evident and not sufficiently supported in the contexts in which they work.

Participating in the European cultural space: entering the contact zone

For most interviewed cultural actors, participating in the Creative Europe programme means creating opportunities to move in and out of the socio-economic and political context which is seen as an indispensable practice to both change local circumstances and invest in international cooperation for the benefit of creative processes. However, this does not necessarily mean that engaging in the shared European cultural space also leads to new forms of belonging to the European community as hoped for by the European

Commission. Participating in the EU-funded projects and interacting with cultural partners from other parts of Europe also entail becoming aware of several disparities at play within the European cultural space. These disparities become apparent due to the different social, economic and political positions of the several cultural actors that take part in the European cultural space. Such positionality inevitably impacts the kinds of belonging that are brought about (Yuval and Davis, 2011: 2).

The multidimensionality of belonging in the European cultural space

The first and most felt disparity encountered by the participants from South East Europe when participating in EU funded cultural initiatives relates to their financial precariousness. For most of them, international funding has been one of the few ways to assure their existence. They live with the knowledge that as soon as the funding ends, their activities might end. While the cultural actors who engage in the Creative Europe programme are rich in cultural capital, they are extremely poor in economic capital in terms of both technical and financial resources. Many of them do not have official premises, nor do they have equipment for implementing and presenting cultural programmes. They do not have a regular income, at times no income at all, and they work with exceedingly small annual budgets (Cvetičanin, 2020: 80–81). Occasionally, this leads to misunderstandings between the different partners participating in projects funded by the Creative Europe programme. As a representative of the Center for Cultural Decontamination, a non-profit cultural institution in Belgrade, declares,

At times our partners ask us to start the project and be refunded afterwards. This is quite common in many EU countries. However, for us this does not work. We really need the money immediately; otherwise we cannot keep our heads above water.²¹

This financial precariousness is further complicated by the fact that the Creative Europe funding schemes cover parts of the costs budgeted for the selected projects. The European Commission covers 60 percent of the budget for small-scale projects and 50 percent for larger-scale projects. The remaining 40–50 percent of the budget has to be covered by the cultural organisations and institutions themselves.²² National governments usually cover parts of the budget, but it is challenging for the governments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia. In all three countries, the overall percentage of funds allocated to culture is around 1 percent of the entire state budget.²³ Hence, the available amount is limited and has to be shared among many players in the field. Most of the budget is reserved for public institutions and little is left for civil-society organisations.²⁴ As a result, financial sources have to come from elsewhere. However, opportunities for alternative funds are scarce. Indeed, from 2005 onwards many of the international funding organisations left the region. Moreover, due to COVID-19, Europe as a whole has been suffering from severe cuts to cultural sectors (Banks, 2020; Betzler et al., 2020; IDEA Consult Goethe-Institute et al., 2021), and this has placed further constraints on international cooperation.²⁵ Although many cultural actors would like to be less dependent on international funding so that they can act more

independently and in a more sustainable fashion,²⁶ it is a pattern difficult to break when resources remain scarce.

Even when actors in the field of culture manage to obtain sufficient funding to participate in the projects, they still struggle with the daily allowances the projects offer. As several participants stated, taking part in international cultural projects often means ‘working double for less money or at times for no money at all’.²⁷ In some cases, a struggle over daily allowances has emerged because project leaders have not considered the European partners’ different standards of living when distributing the overall budget. A representative of the Museum of Bitola describes how she experienced these overlooked inequalities:

For our project we had twenty-five euros to spend per day. This was not enough to cover all the costs. While our partners could pay additional costs from their salaries, we were paying this from our own pockets. Of course, we did not want to skip dinners and show that we had to explain to our families that our personal money was being spent on these kinds of events. I mean, how inferior can you feel!²⁸

This feeling of inferiority resulting from financial disparities was also experienced by other interviewees. They described their social position within the projects as one of being less well off.²⁹ While their partner organisations were supported by their national governments and often had access to alternative forms of financial support, the majority of the participants from South East Europe were continually trying to make ends meet in order to successfully implement their share of the project.³⁰

The second disparity that most of the interviewed cultural actors encountered during their participation in the Creative Europe programme, which feeds into this feeling of inferiority, was the realisation that the EU project requirements are often hard to implement in the local South East European contexts. Their governments had to sign a memorandum of understanding that stated that countries should ‘establish the appropriate structures and mechanisms at the national level and shall adopt all other necessary measures for national coordination and organisation of activities to implement the Programme’ (European Commission, 2014). Yet the national governments did not manage to live up to the required conditions, or they could do so only to a certain extent. This is not only due to reluctance among the current national governments to reform their cultural sectors, but it is also due to different styles of cultural governance.³¹ While most of the post-socialist countries are marked by a strong and often centralised public sector in which the government intervenes in cultural affairs, the European Commission advocates a liberal policy model with limited state intervention and delegated arts-funding systems kept at ‘arm’s length’, with some reliance on free market forces (Vos, 2019: 231–232).³²

Those cultural organisations and institutions that participate in the Creative Europe programme have learned to work with the forms of cultural management advocated by the EU. They gained command over the language used in the funding schemes, understand Western frameworks of cultural policy and are considered trustworthy partners by representatives of (European) cultural organisations with which they have cooperated in the past. In this respect, they are what Sampson (2002) once called ‘project elites’ when he reflected on so-called donor activities in the region in the period between 2000 and

2005 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (p. 35). Project elites are civil-society organisations that are intimately tied to Western ideas and funding; they have knowledge of English and the skill set associated with project management. This strong association with Western ideas and funding is perceived by these successful applicants to the Creative Europe programme as both beneficial and harmful. Although this association makes them successful applicants, they often struggle to implement EU approaches to culture in their local settings. In addition, many successful applicants do not necessarily agree with the EU approach. They see the forced adjustments to the models advocated – in particular the implied bureaucracy as well as the neoliberal forms of management – as a benevolent form of European colonialism (Sampson, 2002) or as a ‘soft form of conditionality’ (Vos, 2017). Finally, the required association with Western ideas has led to the privileging of a fringe of civil society in the allocation of funding (Lafont de Sentenac, 2019: 6). Those actors that do not fit into the liberal-rights market-economy framework, or are not acquainted with its specificities, are overlooked (Kappler and Richmond, 2011: 265).

The two mentioned disparities – financial precariousness and conflicting models of cultural management – are both strongly connected to the national political contexts in which the EU-funded cultural projects are developed. The political context, which varies across the different countries of South East Europe, although it also displays clear similarities, can be considered as the third disparity that cultural actors encounter while participating in the Creative Europe programme. The most pressing issue mentioned in the interviews with participants is that the governments have not developed any long-term strategy in the field of culture, which could open them up for international cooperation. The lack of such long-term strategy is largely caused by what Cvetičanin (2011) has called ‘the politicisation of the cultural sphere’ (p. 274). This politicisation entails that political networks and coalition agreements determine the course of cultural policies, rather than specialised bodies with actual knowledge about the field. In line with this, whenever the political landscape changes, the cultural landscape changes as well. Interviewees contended that most people employed at the ministries are not there because of their knowledge about the field they govern. A civil servant in Sarajevo expressed frustration about this lack of knowledge: ‘when we look at international cooperation in the field of culture, there is no real understanding about the obligations that come with international agreements. On paper everything looks great but in practice we are continuously lagging behind’.³³

Cultural organisations and institutions can hardly escape this dysfunctional system caused by state capture and clientelism (Keil, 2018; Radeljić and Đorđević, 2020). Those cultural actors who try to act independently – and are therefore more dependent on financial injections as they do not receive standard salaries – face multiple problems. For example, some interviewees experienced cuts of available funding from their national government in the midst of their projects due to sudden changes of the conditions of the available funding schemes.³⁴ Moreover, there are examples of disproportional amounts of funding which have been granted to certain cultural organisations and institutions due to their direct links to some of the civil servants within the government. This has led to legal cases in all three countries in which cultural actors have sued their local governments and municipalities for clientelist practices relating to culture budget allocation.³⁵

Due to persistent political dysfunctionality, cultural actors – and particularly those who work independently – continually bump up against a glass ceiling. Their ambition is to create new spaces for critical culture and to break with traditional approaches to culture and the arts. But this can only be achieved insofar as the local authorities allow these spaces to emerge and are willing to facilitate the implementation of these innovative and transnational projects in these fields making international funding indispensable. It is one of the few strategies available to attempt to break through the glass ceiling. At the same time – and in line with the previously mentioned benevolent colonialism or soft conditionality – it can also be counter-effective as it obstructs bottom-up change. As illustrated by a representative of Lokomotiva, a non-profit cultural organisation in Skopje,

International funding can lead to self-colonisation, which means that you believe that the only way to change things is through international recognition. So, change can be brought about only as a result of external incentives. Such externalisation of change removes agency from cultural actors. If we really want to change things, this has to start from a firm belief that what we do is valuable for *ourselves*. We should not develop projects primarily to receive international recognition, but because we want recognition from our own national governments.³⁶

The notion of self-colonisation in this quote is telling. It reveals how the dependency on international funding is not only seen as a confirmation of being less well off in terms of financial and human resources, but also as a confirmation of the existence of deeper power asymmetries. As argued by a representative of Cultural Heritage Without Borders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ‘We first need to create spaces for cultural participation in our own local contexts before we can extend this in a constructive and sustainable way elsewhere’.³⁷ Many of the cultural actors that engage in international funding schemes such as the Creative Europe Programme are the subject of power politics of both the national government and international funders. Being in this position, in which they face constraints, demands and dependency from both sides, they feel that they will never become full participants in their national cultural spaces, nor in the European context.

From the encounters of cultural actors from South East Europe with the Creative Europe programme, it can be concluded that in terms of their ideas, networks and skills, they have a rather firm place within the European cultural space as these align with EU interpretations of this space. However, for many successful applicants to the programme, participation also means to be confronted with their spatial marginality which relates to the social, economic and political conditions of the national settings of which they form a part. Although these cultural actors take part in the European cultural space, they also feel estranged from it as it exposes inequalities in terms of the availability of financial and human resources and the socio-political context in which they have to manoeuvre. In this respect, the European cultural space operates as what Pratt (1991) once referred to as a ‘contact zone’: a social space in which cultures meet, but also clash and grapple with each other due to deeper asymmetrical relations of power (p. 34). Participation in the European cultural space creates recognition alongside a remoteness that relates to the multiple dependencies that the cultural actors from South East Europe face.

Conclusion

By means of the Creative Europe programme, the European Commission aims to create a European cultural space to stimulate belonging to the European community. However, what this space will come to look like and what forms of belonging it will bring about cannot be fully predicted. This article examined South East European cultural actors' experiences with their participation in the Creative Europe programme and made clear that how they perceive their involvement in the European space is influenced by what happens in the corresponding social, cultural and political spaces of which they are part. It reflects Lefebvre's observation, namely that 'what happens in one space impinges on what happens in others, as relations of power within and across them are constantly reconfigured' (Lefebvre, in Cornwall, 2002: 7). Moreover, in line with Yuval-Davis (2011), political projects of belonging have different effects on their members because these members assume different social, economic and political positions within the collectivity that these projects aim to create (p. 2).

The local context's impact became immediately clear upon examining the reasons why organisations and institutions in the field of culture and arts from South East Europe decided to participate in the Creative Europe programme. The majority of the participants – part of the independent cultural scene – use the funding provided by the Creative Europe programme to resist the dominant authoritarianism, the deep socio-economic transformations, the crony capitalism of the political elites and the dysfunctional political systems that characterise the region's failed post-socialist transition process. They use the programme to create spaces in which the general public can channel their dissatisfaction. In these spaces, alternatives can be shown and creativity and free thought can be expressed (see Dragičević-Šešić, 2018; Horvat and Štiks, 2015: 13). For these cultural actors, critically reflecting on and responding to the socio-political circumstances in South East Europe is often more important than (re)connecting with the wider European cultural space. Participating in European funding programmes is about tackling multiple local issues, not necessarily about connecting to other Europeans.

Like other cultural actors and artists all over the world, cultural actors from South East Europe see transnational mobility as an essential aspect of their professional work. This is another important incentive behind their participation in the Creative Europe programme. However, transnational mobility is not commonplace in their local settings as the national governments barely support international cooperation in the field of culture. Consequently, many of the applicants to the Creative Europe programme are pioneers in South East Europe. They are forerunners in terms of their networks, the skills they have developed and the projects that they take part in. In their work, they actively engage a larger European space of cultural cooperation, and they have been part of such this space for quite some time. This is not a consequence of their participation in EU-funded cultural initiatives. Contrary to how the European Commission frames the participation of non-EU members in its culture programme, for many participants from South East Europe the European cultural space has never been inaccessible, nor are they 'new cultural players' within this space as suggested by the first quote (European Commission, 2016). They have access to a wider European cultural space – which is to some extent influenced by EU funding opportunities –, but are continually held back by

the other space they are part of – the social, political and economic situation typical for the national context.

The affiliation with the local social, political and economic context is not only a reason to engage in the Creative Europe programme, but also influences the participants' engagement in the programme and renders several disparities visible compared with their European counterparts. This impacts the notions of belonging that are evoked, and leads to a questioning of EU interpretations of the European cultural space. Participation, on the one hand, confirms the position of cultural organisations and institutions from South East Europe within the European cultural space, as they receive international recognition for the projects that they engage in. On the other hand, the financial insecurity, lack of financial and human resources, and the political instability typical of their national settings expose several disparities and make numerous cultural organisations and institutions feel that they are still operating from the margins. Consequently, they experience a form of semi-otherness in relation to the European cultural space as being both different from and like the rest of Europe (see also Blagojević, 2009: 98, 99).

All things considered, the Creative Europe programme enables cultural actors from South East Europe to move in and out of the European cultural space and find, create, maintain and safeguard (new) places of belonging both within Europe and their local context. This does not necessarily mean that these forms of belonging overlap with those desired by the European Commission, nor that these are a direct consequence of EU interventions. Although the EU sets the contours of its cultural space, the belonging it brings about is determined by the several intersecting social, economic, cultural and political spaces of those who engage with this space, the conditions of their engagement and their position within this space. The social forms of belonging brought about by the European cultural space are multidimensional. They are never constructed along one particular scale, but rather refer to a plurality of local scales (cf. Antonsich, 2010: 653).

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ORCID iD

Claske Vos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3485-8430>

Notes

1. The European Union (EU) started to invest in this strategy from 2005 onwards (Isar, 2015: 499).
2. The first round of this official EU culture programme at Directorate-General for Culture and Education (DG-EAC) started in 2014 and was concluded in 2020 (in line with the EU budget period). The second round started in 2021 and will last until 2027. This article focuses on the projects developed in the first round.
3. This article does not include projects in the MEDIA sub-programme or the cross-sectoral strand. These projects are of a different nature, focusing on digital technologies, international markets, and small and medium-sized enterprises (European Parliament and the Council, 2013: 228–29).
4. These 33 interviews with cultural organisations and institutions represent a variety of cultural actors in terms of sector, size and period of existence. Most of them are based in capital cities (Sarajevo, Skopje and Belgrade), while some are based in other towns and cities (Banja Luka, Mostar, Bitola and Novi Sad). They are active in the fields of theatre, contemporary dance, literature, performance, contemporary and visual art, and architecture. Some of them act as cultural centres hosting different cultural and artistic events. In all, 22 of the interviewed organisations and institutions were civic, and 11 were public. A full list can be requested by contacting the author of this article.
5. Creative Europe Desks are established in 38 European countries to promote European initiatives in the cultural, creative and audio-visual sectors and facilitate participation in the Creative Europe programme. See https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/node/180_fr, last accessed 21 June 2021.
6. The EU commonly uses the term Western Balkans to refer to (potential) candidate states in this part of Europe. Because of the historical and political connotations of the term Balkans, I prefer South East Europe. Culturally and geographically, South East Europe would also include Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Turkey. Yet in this article, the focus is on (potential) candidate states from the former Yugoslavia.
7. Of all the 1352 projects granted in the Culture sub-programme from 2014 to 2020, 238 projects were developed with partner organisations from (potential) candidate states. Within these 238 projects, 47 of the partner organisations were public institutions. All other partners – of which several often participated in one project – were non-governmental organisations (NGOs), foundations, associations, non-profit organisations, and independent publishing houses, theatres and festivals. See the results page: <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/projects/>, last accessed 29 June 2021.
8. Especially around the year 2000, many international organisations invested in cultural projects in South East Europe. With these international funds, projects of progressive cultural actors were financed which was a way to stimulate bottom-up reforms that could contribute to processes of democratisation, more open societies, economic development and, ultimately, EU integration (Alfirević et al., 2017: 412).
9. In the period between 2012 and 2020, protests took place all over the region. People took to the streets in Zagreb, Maribor, Ljubljana, Tuzla, Skopje and Belgrade to fight for social justice and protest against the right-wing governments and the entire political elite (see Štiks, 2015: 138).
10. These projects include REFEST: Images and Word on Refugee Routes (URBAN – culture association, Sarajevo), HEROES WE LOVE. Ideology, Identity and Socialist Art in New Europe and New Mappings of Europe (Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade), Who started all this? Historians against revisionism (Krokodil – literature association, Belgrade) and BORDERLINE OFFENSIVE: laughing in the face of fear (Centre for Cultural Decontamination – non-profit cultural institution, Belgrade).

11. These projects include MAUERSPRINGER: New forms of artistic expression and participation in European street theatre (DAH Teatar – independent theatre troupe, Belgrade), Vectors of Collective Imagination (Kontrapunkt – independent cultural center, Skopje; KUDA – independent cultural center, Novi Sad), Regional Lab: New Culture Spaces and Networks as Drivers of an Innovative and Sustainable Bottom-up Development of Regional Collaboration (OKC Abrašević – independent cultural center, Mostar; JADRO – Association for the Independent Cultural Scene, Skopje; NKSS – Association for the Independent Cultural Scene, Belgrade) and ReCulture: Rebranding of Cultural Institutions in Western Balkans (Cultural Center Trebinje; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Banja Luka; Art Colony Danilovgrad; and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade).
12. This is why a considerable number of the funded programmes invest in formats that allow for such transnational mobility. Within the field of dance, theatre and music, co-productions, travelling performances and festivals are common. Museums primarily invest in exhibitions and workshops, while in the field of literature and arts, translations, residencies and exhibitions dominate.
13. In particular those representing national minorities – such as the Albanian theatre in Skopje – or institutions with a clear affiliation to the post-Yugoslav space – such as the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade and the Museums of Contemporary Arts in all countries in the region.
14. Interview with representative of Albanian Theatre in Skopje, December 2018.
15. Interview with a representative of the Albanian Theatre in Skopje, December 2018.
16. Interviews with the Centre for the Promotion of Science (CPN), the Kolarac Endowment (cultural centre) and BINA (Belgrade International Architecture Week), Belgrade 2016; with the Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, October 2018; with the Sarajevo Symphonic Orchestra, MESS (International Theatre Festival Sarajevo) and Biblioteka Sarajeva (public library), Sarajevo, November 2018; and with Museum Bitola (history and ethnographic museum), Bitola, December 2018.
17. Interview with the coordinators of the international projects at the Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, October 2018.
18. Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (SANU) and CPN: Quantum Music and Beyond Quantum Music, MESS: International Young Makers in Action and SHIFT KEY.
19. Interview with a representative of Dah Teatar (independent theatre troupe), Belgrade, September 2018.
20. Interview with a representative from Lokomotiva (non-profit cultural organisation), Skopje, December 2018.
21. Interview with funding expert of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (non-profit cultural institution), Belgrade, October 2018.
22. An exception is a funding scheme initiated in 2019: Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans. In these projects, the EU covers 85 percent of the funding (EACEA, 2019: 19).
23. In 2019, the budgets spent on culture were as follows: Croatia €168,023,000 (0.88% of the total budget), Slovenia €162,879,000 (1.68% of the total budget), Serbia €79,565,000 (0.74% of the total budget), the Republic of North Macedonia €57,843,000 (1.55% of the total budget), Montenegro €22,181,000 (1.13% of the total budget) and Bosnia and Herzegovina €5,654,000 (0.42% of the total budget, although the numbers for BiH are only indicative due to the complex institutional organisation of cultural policy in BiH) (Centar za empirijske studije kulture jugoistočne Evrope and Nezavisna Kulturna scena Srbije (CESK and NKSS), 2019).
24. A study on Serbia's state spending on culture in 2019 revealed that the institutional sector receives about 23 million dinars more (113 million dinars for 207 projects) than the

- non-governmental sector (90 million dinars for 261 projects): http://www.seecult.org/vest/konkurs-mki-proceduralno-pohvalan-ali-budzet-minoran?fbclid=IwAR0vpNljbogMXemxmBBUndgvS_2HdUL6krwUV2Cx7m9BLOnBt3-Qy46PZw, (accessed 26 August 2020).
25. For cultural actors from South East Europe, COVID-19 led to a further decline in the sector, while the national governments still refused to take responsibility (see Cvetičanin and Dinić, 2021: 22–32).
 26. My interlocutors in Bosnia and Herzegovina – which has been most affected by activities from donors – especially referred to this. They consider donor dependency as destructive for a healthy cultural sector as it often means that local and international concerns have to be compromised.
 27. Mentioned in interviews with a representative of Cultural Heritage Without Borders BiH, Biblioteka Sarajeva (public library) and URBAN (cultural centre), Sarajevo, November 2018; the Albanian Theatre, Skopje, December 2018; Krokodil (literature association); and DAH teatar (independent theatre troupe), Belgrade, September and October 2018.
 28. Interview with a representative of the Museum of Bitola, Bitola, December 2018.
 29. Interview with a representative of Krokodil (literature association), Belgrade, September 2018; the Albanian Theatre, Skopje, December 2018; and Biblioteka Sarajeva, Sarajevo, November 2018.
 30. Experienced participants had become rather strategic when considering partnerships. They would insist on a realistic deadline, more than 50 percent of the funding provided by the EU, and reliable project leaders and partners that consider financial inequalities among its partner organisations. If these conditions were not met, they would not engage as they risked losing more than they might gain from the project. Interviews with the director of the National Museum in Bitola, December 2018; with representatives of Heartefact (fund and creative space), Belgrade, October 2018; with MESS (International Theatre Festival Sarajevo) and URBAN (culture association), Sarajevo, November 2018; and with representatives of Kontrapunkt (independent cultural centre), Skopje, December 2018.
 31. Dubois (2014) has referred to this as the existence of different cultural policy regimes.
 32. These kinds of mismatches also affect the work of cultural actors from other parts of Europe. Despite the EU's efforts to harmonise national legislation between member states, EU frameworks and national legislation deviate significantly (see Kobolt, 2008).
 33. Interview with a civil servant in Sarajevo, November 2018.
 34. Interviews with representatives of the DAH Teatar (independent theatre troupe), Nova Iskra (creative hub) in Belgrade, October 2018, and URBAN (cultural organisation) in Sarajevo, November 2018.
 35. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2015 several cultural actors condemned the minister of culture, Zora Dujmović, of violating the law and discriminating in the allocation of funds (see <https://www.klix.ba/magazin/kultura/kulturnjaci-tuzili-ministricu-dujmovic-medjunarodni-dogadjaji-iz-sarajeva-okarakterisani-kao-bosnjacki/180321039>, last accessed 30 June 2021). In the Republic of North Macedonia, the state was sued for several illegal actions in relation to the Skopje 2014 overhaul of the city centre (see <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/11/29/probe-finds-misuse-in-skopje-2014/>, last accessed 30 June 2021). In Serbia, the independent dance scene launched a lawsuit against the Ministry of Culture in 2016 due to the illegal allocation of the budget for (co-)financing projects in the field of stage creation and interpretation (see: <https://www.masina.rs/?p=8902>, last accessed 12 November 2020).
 36. Interview with a representative from Lokomotiva (non-profit cultural organisation), Skopje, December 2018, my emphasis.
 37. Interview with a representative of Cultural Heritage Without Borders BiH, Sarajevo, November 2018.

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Biographical note

Claske Vos is an Assistant Professor at the Department of European Studies at the Faculties of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam. She investigates the implementation and appropriation of EU funded cultural programmes in (potential) candidate countries in South East Europe. She specialised herself in the anthropology of EU policy with a particular focus on cultural policy, cultural heritage and South East Europe.