

**“SARAJEVO ASPIRES TO CONNECT ARTISTS”  
BY KIRSIKKA MORING**

BASED ON THE CONFERENCE:  
RECONSTRUCTING CULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY IN THE  
REGION OF SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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**ERICARTS**

Dahlmannstr. 26, D - 53113 Bonn  
Tel. (+49-228) 2420996/7 \* Fax 241318  
e-mail: [info@ericarts.org](mailto:info@ericarts.org)

## **“Sarajevo aspires to connect artists”**

**by Kirsikka Moring**

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### **Balkans artists met in the deserted city for the first time after the war**

SARAJEVO - Europe is divided into countries where bridges are illuminated with festive lights after darkness falls, and those where bridges are fatal crossing points - or where they no longer exist.

A week ago over 70 artists and cultural producers from the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans region met in Sarajevo together with the representatives of the cultural sector NGOs of the European Union countries, aiming to discover how these two worlds could again come across.

Their message to the world is still bleak. The prevalence of peace is a miracle. Will winter bring war to Montenegro? And the next few months will show whether Serbia will be able to avoid a civil war, noted the artists of Belgrade equivocally.

But somehow they still manage to have faith in the potential of the arts, despite the fact that nationalist xenophobia is fastening its impenetrable grip throughout the whole country.

The host city of the meeting, Sarajevo, is still lying in ruins after the war, a crisis zone marked by economic and social problems.

One of our discussions takes place in the National Theatre, which is the only theatre space in the city with heating. The Swedes pay the heating costs. The Avignon Festival has sent the few spotlights in the theatre.

The winds of freedom of the 1984 Olympics, multiculturalism and optimism have stilled in Sarajevo where every building, street and park seems to be adorned by an imaginary-mourning band.

Half of the 600 000 inhabitants of the city have fled from the war, including the majority of artists: ballet dancers, musicians, and painters...

The military vehicles of the peacekeeping forces and armed street patrols dominate the cityscape; the prayer calls from the minarets reign the range of sounds.

It is quite logical to hold the meeting in the same city where the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, marking the final end of the Kosovo war, was internationally confirmed, with President Martti Ahtisaari in a central role.

Finland thus has certain buoyancy in Sarajevo, but high hopes are also placed on us as supporters of democratic processes also in the field of culture.

#### Obligatory visas limit connections

In our discussions means were searched in the meeting for creating networks of co-operation among the artists of the Balkans. The central question here is reconstruction of cultural life and culture industries, not on the level of ceremonial speeches, but on the level of concrete projects. We also tried to link our work to the implementation of the Stability Pact and wished that our work would be noted in the Pact's first follow-up meeting to be held in January in Budapest. The Stability Pact signed by 27 countries doesn't in any way take into account cultural policy and the potential of artists and culture industries in alleviating the hatred between nationalities. It has still a long way to go to make even the simplest practical administrative work in the cultural co-operation between the countries of the South Eastern Europe.

The artists who came to the Sarajevo meeting met for the first time in the region after the war, since obligatory visas in the former Yugoslavia now place an obstacle to cross-border co-operation.

For example, the artists still residing in Sarajevo cannot travel without a visa to any other countries than Croatia, Macedonia and Hungary. The Bulgarian artists who tried to attend the meeting were turned back at the border of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They weren't aware of the visa requirement that had become effective in September.

One of the central manifests of the meeting was, in fact, finding a solution to the visa problem that has brought artistic exchange to a standstill, and securing the free movement of ideas and people.

Small steps, concretely

The three-day-long discussions were heated but not hostile, leading to some twenty initiatives for joint projects.

The most important of these was the proposal for establishing a common data bank for the Balkans. Much needed information on joint-European funding, training programmes and, for example, festivals and artists' collectives in which artists from the Balkans could participate would be compiled in the bank.

The Macedonians suggested the city of Skopje as the centre of the Balkans data bank and artists' network. The city hosts a multimedia centre bringing together the performing arts, multimedia and arts research. The centre has, in conjunction with an arts museum, held many joint events for the artists of the Balkans.

The Soros -funded European University in Budapest has already now co-ordinated training in cultural management and production, and many other projects in the Balkans.

For the most part the artists believed in the type of development that advances in small steps, such as exchange of exhibitions and artists, co-operation among theatres, or the co-production of TV -programmes and films. For example, the Belgrade -based film company, VANS, seeks financing for a co-production with partners in Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade, a TV -series portraying the lives of people from the Balkans who have emigrated to different parts of the world.

Also another project, Omnibus, has been created in co-operation among film students from these three cities. Three scriptwriters each tell their own story of adjusting to the post-war

world. The aim is to combine the stories in one feature film, but the project still lacks financing.

Aide aux Musiques Innovatrice, the centre for innovative music in Marseilles, invited the musicians from the Balkans to take part in its project, Chaos and Communication, which aims at creating a link between Africa and Europe. Remont, a group of opposition artist in Belgrade, were assigned the task of creating and updating the electronic pages of the recently founded Balkans Arts Network (BAN).

It was also suggested in the meeting that each of the nine next year's European Cities of Culture should "adopt" one city from the former Yugoslavia region and support its cultural reconstruction.

#### Fewer intermediaries

Work is presently done, upon the initiative of Austria, to arrange a meeting between the ministers of culture of the different regions of the former Yugoslavia in which the possibilities of co-operation could be discussed on an inter-governmental level.

The Stability Pact signed last summer in Sarajevo emphasises the importance of co-ordinating international funding assistance and the clearly determined division of labour between the different funding sources.

Similar problems also apply to new cultural networks in the Balkans and their potential funding. In the meeting it was suggested that cultural support should be directed to, for example, joint funds for the Balkans, from which different projects, organisations and arts centres could apply for funding.

The leading principle here is that the funds should be directed directly to those engaged in cultural projects, thus having the actual financial needs.

Pirkko Rainesalo from the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the President-Elect of the Cultural Committee at the Council of Europe stated that the Nordic Council of

Ministers is presently engaged in discussions on closer co-operation between the Balkans and the North.

### **Arts in year Zero, small and diverse networks preserve hope**

Sarajevo - "We are not part of Europe. We live in nowhere", says Dubravko Bibanovic, a theatre director from Sarajevo who during the years of war was the director of the underground *War Theatre* in Sarajevo. "We have fallen into the lowest pit of entertainment culture, with political agit-prop as the only alternative".

"During the years under siege, all kinds of stars visited us, Vanessa Redgrave, Susan Sontag, Bernard-Henri Lévy and many more". "Was it to prove their own heroism? And what, for example, did the elaborate and expensive theatre production, *Sarajevo, Sarajevo*, funded with European money have to do with Sarajevo? Nothing, nothing at all".

Bibanovic feels bitter. The theatre scene in Sarajevo has been destroyed, the actors have left, and the five remaining directors are unemployed. But who cares. It is "peace" now, after all.

He would like to establish an experimental theatre studio in Sarajevo. Will it remain just a dream?

Also the city's unique collection of 105 pieces of contemporary art is still left without exhibition sites, the main concert hall has been bombed and the national library is lying in ruins.

Enver Hadzlozerspahic is presently engaged in collecting funds for a cultural centre in Sarajevo, a building complex that would host a museum of contemporary art, a museum of architecture and a concert hall built underground.

The networks of the opposition in Belgrade are still alive

The situation is even bleaker in Belgrade where the artists try to fight against the government propaganda industry.

Milena Dragicevic-Sesic teaches at the Belgrade Arts Academy, the Institute of Television and Film and the university. "Here we work with our coats and gloves on. There is no heating".

She has co-ordinated many different projects for developing urban culture in the Balkans, as well as festivals, and raised a new generation of cultural managers and producers.

"The theatres in Belgrade are closed, some of them were destroyed in bombings. There are only two operating theatres. Groups put up performances wherever they can think of, a school chemistry class, anywhere...".

Milena tells that the cultural buildings in Belgrade are in ruins "both morally, ideologically and technically". They should be brought to use again, but how?

Uros Djuric, an artist from the Remont group confirms: "Arts institutions have been harnessed to serve the government's fomentation work and to celebrate the official political ideology.

Tasteless, nationalist pseudo-folklore rules on the market. "We live in total seclusion, the arts scene has collapsed to zero level".

"Tens of thousands young representatives of the intelligentsia live as emigrants abroad without ever knowing what is really happening here".

Despite all this, groups still operate tenaciously underground, in a network of independent theatres, artists and a radio station.

#### Citizens' co-operation

The organisers of the meeting in Sarajevo were *ERICArts* based in Bonn and *FinnEKVIT*, based in Helsinki together with regional organisers: *Blue Dragon* (Sremski Karlovci), *Culturelink* (Zagreb) and the *Goethe Institute* (Sarajevo). The meeting was supported by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO,

Austrian Federal Chancellery and *Kulturkontakt*, the German Foreign Ministry, and the Sarajevo City and Canton. The meeting was organised within the framework of the Finnish Presidency of the European Union, but based on the co-operation among NGOs.

"Presently the artists and cultural producers from the Balkans shun government programmes. It is easier to act directly on the level of artists' networks", says the Finnish co-organiser of the meeting, Ritva Mitchell.