

FORUM BEOGRAD

Душа Европе A Soul for Europe Europa eine Seele geben Une âme pour l'Europe

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Forum Belgrade 30-31 March 2007

Report

Organisers:



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1. The Forum Belgrade was convened as a crucial successor to the 2nd Berlin Conference 'A Soul for Europe', held in November 2006. It drew attention to two aspects of contemporary European life that are too easily ignored: the reality that the cultural connections between Europeans, whether they come from the present EU or not, are as strong as the economic and political connections; and that the barriers to developing real cultural co-operation will have serious political consequences unless they are removed.

2. Politicians, cultural operators, academics and artists congregated in Belgrade to explore the issues that complicate the cultural progress of Europe. They agreed that, while rhetoric supporting the importance of culture in European integration and development is welcome, there remain serious practical obstacles to giving that importance tangibility.

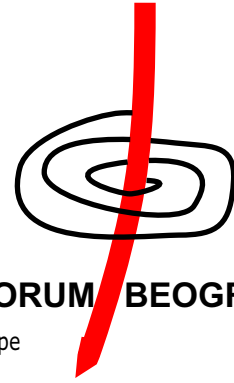
3. It was agreed by all that, nearly 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is still unnecessarily difficult for people engaged in cultural work to move across borders. Even those inside the EU are still faced by bureaucratic restrictions, while those from Council of Europe countries are faced with sanctions against their movement almost as fierce as under Communism. Visa regimes set by EU countries to discourage migrant industrial workers are being used to prevent the flow of cultural ideas and practitioners.

4. Equally discriminatory costs of education are undermining the aims of the Bologna process and preventing all but the richest young people from pursuing university and professional education in countries other than their own.

=> The Forum Belgrade called for urgent reform and relaxation of curbs on the movement of cultural practitioners and students.

5. EU programmes, such as the new Culture programme, are in theory open to both the accession countries and the wider neighbourhood of candidate countries. However the criteria, originally designed to ensure that participating partners shared project costs, put unreasonable strain on the budgets of small organisations outside the Euro area. The Euro exchange rate, and the wide discrepancies in operating budgets between 'old' EU and 'old' Eastern European organisations, mean that the openness of the programmes is rendered meaningless.

=> The Forum Belgrade called for greater flexibility in programme criteria and for the contributions of project partners to be calculated in other ways than financial input.



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MERITIS
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6. Structures in Civil Society are unequally developed across Europe. In some countries, especially in Northern Europe, there is a strong and old tradition of independent civil society organisations able to initiate projects and sustain initiatives. In many other countries, however, the political legacy has left civil society either weak or uncomfortably dependent on government. These inequalities need to be recognised and support needs to be given to develop the strength and competence of civil society organisations that can then take their place in national and European networks. Such networks are vital for providing advocacy for cultural life.

=> The Forum Belgrade called for every country to have a campaigning and advocacy organisation in the cultural field, capable of understanding and engaging with the political process.

7. It has to be realised that there is a serious mismatch between the importance attributed to cultural life by political and business leaders, and the persistent under-funding given to cultural organisations. Many cultural practitioners and entrepreneurs are struggling on incomes that are unacceptably low, given the contribution to social and economic development they are providing.

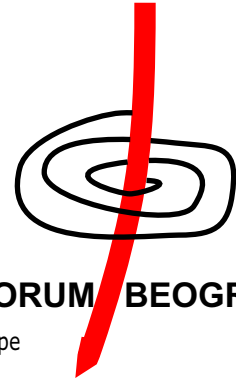
=> The Forum Belgrade called on Governments and Business Sponsors to stop assuming that those engaged in providing cultural life can be underpaid on the assumption that their employment is somehow a pleasurable luxury.

8. All of these factors come together in the problems facing small and independent organisations. Sustaining small networks and independent organisations is essential for a diverse, vibrant and innovative cultural economy. Artists need independent but viable spaces in which to create, exhibit and perform. Austerity programmes, such as that being faced by Ljubljana's arts organisations, that concentrate money only in state institutions cut off the life blood that is needed to infuse those institutions for the future.

=> Just as Forum Belgrade recognised the necessity of having stable and properly sustained major institutions, it called on cities and governments to work harder to create a climate of enterprise for independent operators so that valuable initiatives are able to flourish.

9. The role of international organisations, foundations and the national cultural institutes of major European countries is seen as essential in improving all aspects of cultural life.

=> Forum Belgrade called on them to extend both their investment and the commitment of time and expertise devoted to those countries still in the process of fundamental reform. If their efforts are not sustained then much of the previous investment will have been wasted.



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10. There does not need to be a perpetuation of the antipathy between the institutions that are part of the state cultural fabric and those operate independently. They should be symbiotically linked and recognised as equally and intrinsically valuable to cultural life. This will require significant modernisation of bureaucratic thinking, rigorous reform of the public sector and change in the machinery of cultural governance that, despite economic and political advances, has been side-stepped in too many countries. Political trust is in short supply in many nations; both trust of the political process by citizens and trust of the cultural sector by politicians.

=> The Forum Belgrade called on politicians to have more faith in the competence of cultural practitioners to contribute to the wider social and economic goals of European life.

11. Cultural life is not about the affirming of national prejudice and worn-out traditions. It is about the constant invention and criticism of human expression.

=> The Forum Belgrade called on governments to respect the role of artists to place a mirror before society and that the resulting comment would be unlikely to be flattering.

12. The media need to become more engaged in reporting and contributing to cultural life. This means more space, but it also means greater openness to the diversity of voices and ideas that are available. Too often media coverage and tone is sensationalist, frivolous or censorious. And in an uncomfortable large number of countries media organisations offer little space for original work or challenging performance. The same criticism was levelled at many of the cultural industries, whether global or national, that have gained strength in the last quarter of a century.

=> The Forum Belgrade called for more imagination, investment and partnership from media organisations.

Finally it was recognised that the arguments for the importance of culture in European life are very similar to those of the importance of an improved environment. However advocacy for culture lags 15 years behind the environmental movement. The Forum looked forward to a time when cultural activity, free and well-resourced, is seen as just as indispensable to Europe's future peace and prosperity.

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