

Norden Balkan Culture Switch 2003-2005 (NBCS)

Background

Over the last decades, the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) has invested in many artistic and cultural exchanges with regions around the world. Their goal has been to build new networks between the Nordic countries and the other countries / regions, and to present the results or effects of such cooperation in the Nordic countries.

In 2003, the NCM launched a three year programme, "Norden Balkan Culture Switch" (NBCS), as a series of artistic and cultural exchanges between the countries making up the Western Balkans (ex-Yugoslavia countries except Slovenia, but including Albania) and the Nordic Countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden).

The main goals of the NCM were:

- to focus on young professionals and artists;
- to encourage mobility between the Nordic countries and the Western Balkans; and
- to facilitate multilateral management and participation involving at least three countries in each region.

Some of the expected outcomes of the NBCS are: the creation of interregional networks, greater mobility, further collaboration and regional co-operation in and between the two regions.

How it works

The NBCS programme was coordinated in the Western Balkan region by a local NGO foundation - Balkankult - whose mission is to promote regional cultural co-operation and in the North by the Secretariat of the NCM with the participation of key cultural institutes throughout the different Nordic countries on sector specific projects. Their role was to facilitate communication, organise cooperation projects and mobility related logistics between:

- individuals artists and cultural professionals from the two regions; and
- cultural organisations and institutions from the two regions including jobswops.

The artistic exchange and cooperation projects were planned during the first year of the programme (2003) and were carried out during 2004-2005. Overall, 40 projects were supported ranging in scope from film festivals, exhibitions, workshops, concerts, lectures, publishing etc. More than 30 different institutions from both regions participated in the programme.

One illustrative example is the literature programme *Switch* carried out in 2004. The key actors involved were the Swedish Institute (SI), the five Nordic Literature Information Centres and cultural managers and publishers from the Western Balkans. Two main events were organised:

- *Switch #1*: Readings and panels organised in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo in May 2004. 15 Nordic writers, three from each country met 8 Western Balkan writers.
- *Switch #2*: Translation Seminar held in Visby, readings, meetings and seminars held in Stockholm and Gothenburg. The majority of writers who participated in Switch #1 participated in these seminars.

One of the main results of the programme was that it provided a platform for writers to meet and take the opportunity to generate follow-up projects on their own. A survey done with writers from the North following Switch 1 and found that over 75% of the participants had developed future plans with their new colleagues from the Balkans. Many of the writers expect to have their works translated in both regions in the near future.

Results

An evaluation of the NBCS undertaken by the Mr. Rui Hassenkam Serzedelo, Danish arts & business and published by the Nordic Council of Ministers shows:

- *Artistic relevance and intercultural dialogue* have been, for both coordinators and participants, the best achievements of most NBCS programmes and their related projects.
- *Multi-lateral participation* has also to a large extent generated a number of high quality and inspiring exchanges likely to motivate further initiatives.
- *Multi-lateral management*, while challenging given the difference management strategies, approaches and realities between the two regions, has opened up the possibility to pursue project cooperation on more equal terms. Shared ownership of projects developed within the framework of the programme was deemed crucial as were introductory seminars for all partners and organisations to learn about the differences in project culture, working methods, expectations and communication processes.
- *Learning processes beyond the artistic focus of the programme have been facilitated.* Even if political and psychological differences between the two regions have been difficult to bridge, they have also enriched both sides. Nordic participants and organisers have learned to understand art, politics and social issues from a new perspective, and have been forced to reflect upon their own personal and professional situation. West Balkan participants and organisers have been inspired by the artistic input from the North, as well as by the Nordic model, its freedom of expression, its respect for individual autonomy and its decentralised management structures.
- *Gaining perspectives.* Participants from both regions had the opportunity to play the role of "host" and "guest". The evaluation suggests that these dual roles intensified cultural immersion and increased knowledge of each other's socio-cultural and artistic contexts. It was suggested that this approach become a fundamental activity for the as a constructive and valuable approach to intercultural dialogue and cultural exchange.

An important objective of the NCM was achieved, namely that the NBCS helped to facilitate regional cooperation between colleagues within the Balkan region as well as within the Nordic region including the development of new projects and co-productions. A remarkable opening has taken place – especially between Belgrade and Zagreb - in several artistic fields e.g. literature, music and visual arts. For example, the *Switch* literature programme enabled Croatian and Bosnian writers to participate in literary events held in Belgrade; unprecedented in the immediate post-war period and acting as a step for further cooperation and exchange.

Another result of the NBCS was the creation of a new interregional initiative, the Balkan Union for Ministers of Culture. This new network is to operate at the level of cultural policy decision-makers and is to establish a new forum for exchange of know-how and experiences between cultural institutions in the Western Balkans.

The NBCS programme came to an end in 2005. Despite this natural conclusion, several individual artists remain in contact and continue to work together on an informal level. Few institutional initiatives have continued in a systematic way outside of the formal Nordic-Balkan cooperation framework. There are also no signs that the Ministers of Culture network is actively pursuing joint activities or exchanges.

One of the projects initiated under the NBCS programme was "Bridging the North" has continued as an activity of the Balkankult Foundation Mobility Fund in 2006 and 2007 with new financial and institutional partners such as the Ministry for Culture Serbia, local communities, private companies ACTAVIS and Zdravlje Actavis, the Embassies of Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden located in Belgrade, FilmKontakt North, Concerts of Sweden, etc.

Another successful off-spring of the NBCS programme is a film festival "Nordic Panaroma" which travels throughout the Balkan region showing selected shorts, documentaries and animation films produced by Nordic film makers. These films originate from the original 20 year old Nordic Panaroma festival organised in different Nordic countries each year. In the past couple of years, the original festival has created a spotlight section in its programme for films produced by Balkan filmmakers. There are plans in development to expand this spotlight on Balkan films with a side programme of meetings and workshops where film directors and producers from both regions can meet.

As for the Nordic Council of Ministers, their focus on establishing cooperation activities with other European or world regions came to an end in 2006. New priorities have been set within a mobility programme framework 2007-2009 which emphasises project funding, support for transregional cooperation and networking between individual artists and NGOs within the Nordic region itself. One of the main lessons learned by the NCM is that institutional cooperation with other regions has been challenging and has not necessarily led to sustainable partnerships. As stated in the concluding remarks of the NBCS evaluation, "grass root organisations would in some situations probably be more appropriate partners than established institutions".

Sources

NBCS Evaluation: <http://www.norden.org/pub/kultur/kultur/sk/TN2005727.pdf>

Nordic Council of Ministers: <http://norden.siteseeker.se/?q=Nordic+Balkans+culture+switch&i=en>

Balkankult: <http://www.balkankult.org>

Author

Dimitrije Vujadinovic