

Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans

Background

Since the beginnings of its cooperation activities in Eastern Europe Switzerland has been running a programme for the promotion of culture. From the outset, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) commissioned Pro Helvetia (PH), the Swiss Arts Council, to manage the programme. Since 2002 the mandate has been carried out as "Swiss Cultural Programme South East Europe and Ukraine" (SCP), which was implemented in six countries in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia/Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania), the Ukraine, and on a reduced scale in Kosovo.

As of 1st July 2008 a new restructured programme was launched called the Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans, run by the Regional Programme Office in Sarajevo with a network of local offices in the region. Thus the Swiss cultural supporting scheme has entered a new and final phase lasting from 2008 to 2012.

How it works

The Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans has a uniquely bottom-up regional approach to culture. In practice this means that the Regional Programme Office in Sarajevo would progressively take over all programmatic activities and overall management of the Programme from the Pro Helvetia main office in Zurich. This decentralization of the programme not only aims at putting the region "on an equal footing" with the donor country, Switzerland, but it also allows for the local expertise and knowledge, through its staff based throughout the region, to feed valuable insight into the Programme. With this the SCP has achieved not only a greater appreciation among the local beneficiaries in the region, but also praise and recognition among international organizations. The Programme's significance becomes even more central in light of the withdrawal from the region of other international organizations, and the major funding gaps this has created.

Practically, the SCP in the Western Balkans will focus support on promoting independent cultural actors and initiatives through regional cooperation projects with Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo by supporting long term projects. With a clear aim to regional integration, networking and collaboration in the cultural scenes of the focus countries as an important element of a participatory, open and dynamic civil society the SCP is an innovative development programme which aims to fill the gaps in the cultural landscape of these countries.

Apart from the general financial support, the Regional Programme Office will also have an innovative approach, offer professional support and diversified services to local organization such as: ideas, and content level support to local stakeholders in developing new initiatives and projects jointly to facilitate a more efficient regional cooperation, building up locally embedded structures and networking - through capacity building, empowerment and promotion of cultural initiatives and organizations. The Programme will promote an outreach and accessibility for a broader participation, by bringing together a greater number of relevant cultural actors in the region in order to durably strengthen the structures and the context in which these projects are realized in.

Results

The new Swiss regional cultural support scheme necessitated a new redefined approach to the Western Balkans. An undertaking performed out of the need to enhance and further develop the ongoing support. This pioneering approach was based on past experiences and months of

assessment of the existing cultural infrastructure in the region as well as an overall assessment of existing support for cultural and social activities - in order to optimize the impact and relevance of general funding patterns for the Western Balkans - in view of the social and political changes occurring in these countries.

The objectives of the Swiss Cultural Programme in the Western Balkans transcend simple cultural support via bilateral cultural exchange or promotion of artists. Instead the support aims to achieve a greater social impact through sustaining projects which promote cultural actors who act as "agents for change" who in turn can stress the relevance and impact of culture in the Western Balkans.

The overall goals therefore aim to create a sound social frame to cultural development: to contribute to the promotion of democracy and freedom of expression, to conflict resolution, intercultural cooperation and respect for minorities. Its thematic priorities include youth, gender equity and the creation of structures for broad cultural participation while taking into account good governance principles.

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