

Complaints over Serbian City's 2021 Culture Capital Preparations

Matthew Griffin | Novi Sad | BIRN | August 5, 2019

Feeling left out, independent artists and cultural groups are unhappy with how Novi Sad is preparing for its moment in the spotlight in 2021.

Serbia's second city, Novi Sad, is gearing up to be one of three European Capitals of Culture in 2021, but some members of the independent cultural scene in the city on the Danube complain they have been largely excluded from planning for the project.

Seat of the country's northern Vojvodina province, Novi Sad was picked for the honour in 2016 alongside Timisoara in Romania and Elefsina in Greece.

In 2017, a European Union-appointed monitoring panel released a report expressing concern about the artistic direction of the Novi Sad project and a lack of participation from the independent cultural scene in the city, famous since 2000 as host of the popular Exit music festival.

A subsequent report, released in June, said the city had made "promising" progress, noted the strong political support for the project and commended the "capacity building activities for the local public cultural institutions and NGOs". It also, however, acknowledged the concerns of the independent cultural scene.

It described the involvement of artists as "not yet fully visible" and said procedures to involve local stakeholders "may be too strict to attract individual artists."

"The role of the independent sector for the European Capital of Culture is not yet fully reflected in the current outline of the programme," it said.

The report cited those in charge of the project as saying all groups had an equal opportunity to participate in the project and that "potential partners are treated equally".

It said that the Novi Sad 2021 Foundation had dedicated 2019 to “involving the independent sector in the Novi Sad 2021 project.”

Halfway through the year, however, some independent artists and cultural activists remain unhappy.



Zoran Pantelic in the office of kuda.org

Consultation after the fact

“The doors are closed to us,” said Branka Curcic, co-founder of the Group for Conceptual Politics, a local advocacy group for housing and local community issues. “It’s a big problem and it’s a public problem.”

Curcic’s organisation sent two open letters to the monitoring panel last year describing what it said was the “collapse of the institutions of cooperation between government and civil society”.

“I don’t think that the encouragement and support to [the] independent cultural scene is visible,” Curcic said.

The Foundation and the city authorities did not respond on record to requests for comment for this story. The European Commission, the executive arm of the

EU, and the monitoring panel referred this reporter to the latest monitoring report.

In a statement on the Foundation's website, Vuk Radulovic, head of the Programme Development Sector for Novi Sad 2021, said the latest monitoring report had "very positively assessed the involvement of various stakeholders of the cultural scene".

Radivoj Novakov, a local tour guide, told BIRN by email that the initiative had created a "new positive image for the city", lured more tourists, improved the economy and cultural offering and encouraged the "feeling that we are... part of European civilisation."

But Zoran Pantelic, co-founder of a local art and advocacy group called kuda.org, said the Foundation had only consulted the independent scene after already deciding on a set of projects.

Independent artists and activists had the chance to comment on some of the specifics, but not the overall strategy, he said.

"They come to us much later," Pantelic said in English, "after all business [is] done."



The old Chinese neighborhood in Novi Sad

'Private project'

In an email to BIRN, Tadija Janicic, a local artist whose work has been displayed around the world, complained that the Foundation had yet to launch a "serious" exhibition of local artists and described its impact on Novi Sad as "purely cosmetic".

"The local art scene is almost non existent and the impact of the Novi Sad 2021 Foundation is purely cosmetic. I personally find the most of their cultural programs and projects being very low quality. As a painter, I do not remember a serious exhibition was organized. Still, I hope the projects will become more advanced as the year 2021 is approaching," he said.

Janicic's fellow artist, Petar Mirkovic, told BIRN: "They are very hermetic, very non-transparent. They always said, 'Okay, let's work together, we are open', but they are not. They are just pretending that they are."

"Nobody is invited to participate in 2021," he said. "It's [a] private project."

Janicic concurred, writing that "the Foundation has barely spoken to [him] in planning the projects."

Janicic and Mirkovic work in the city's Chinese quarter, an area of the city that has been a point of contention between officials and the independent scene.

The Foundation has taken on the task of [restoring](#) the former factory district, and as part of that project the city [evicted](#) the artists and artisans who lived there. Mirkovic said that he and Janicic had refused to leave and were still working in the neighborhood.



Petar Mirkovic in his atelier, showing a book that documents the history of the Chinese quarter.

‘Fight for our own’

Nevertheless, Slobodan Jovic, head of the Foundation of Novi Sad Architects, which collaborates with the Novi Sad 2021 Foundation, said that progress had been made over recent years.

Communication, he said, is now “possible and it’s there. Before, it wasn’t there.”

Jovic, who said he was also involved in the local cultural scene, said that those in charge of the project had recognised “that they need the capacity of the people from [the] independent scene to finish this job.”

Pantelic, too, conceded there had been some movement; kuda.org, he said, had worked with the city in developing six production lines focusing on different aspects of culture and that the local government planned to hold open calls for funding for each of these categories where previously there had been only one annual open call for culture funds.

Still, it was not enough, he told BIRN.

Novi Sad 2021 was shaping up to be a missed opportunity, Pantelic warned, citing what he called the Foundation’s “bad methodology” and failure to understand the local cultural scene.

“We have to fight for our own,” he said. “And unfortunately all these opportunities, which [come] from this agenda of European Culture Capital, will totally miss us.”