European festivals: art, diplomacy, resistance

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As challenges Europe faces keep multiplying, the cultural sector is often pushed to the background to make room for economy and security on the governments' list of priorities.

Yet festivals not only bring arts and culture to everyday audiences but they also play an essential role in building communities, helping revitalise cities, presenting forms of resistance to autocratisation, and opening previously unavailable channels of communication.

In this special edition, EURACTIV looks at how festivals can act as cultural diplomats in the increasingly polarised world, at the economic opportunities they present and how Europe's efforts to help artists resist democratic backsliding outside the bloc are seen from without.
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As Russian aggression in Ukraine continues, and renewed clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan stoke fears of another active conflict in Europe’s East, the continent’s festival-makers met in Yerevan to talk about the power of art and its cultural diplomatic potential.

“We are together to listen and talk in the next few days about the arts, about the artists, about the need for dialogue, about audiences, about cities. About Europe in the world,” European Festivals Association (EFA) President Jan Briers said in his welcome speech at the opening of the almost week-long Arts Festivals Summit in the Armenian capital.

Celebrating the 70th anniversary of the EFA’s founding, itself created in the aftermath of Europe’s most devastating war to date, the organisation representing Europe’s festival-makers presented its vision for the coming years, while proclaiming solidarity with victims of violence.

“Without transgressing from our remit, we feel obliged to state our solidarity with the victims of war to express our firm belief in the sovereignty and dignity of all people, to endorse the need to de-colonise the last empire and hear the voices of the oppressed,” reads the preface for the ‘Menu for Action under continual construction’, the association’s fluid blueprint for action “70-Years-On”.

Committing to the “catalytic potential of festivals”, the cultural event organisers posited that “few festivals are politically engaged. Yet inherently each festival is based on
specific values that may carry a political message: being apolitical is also a political standpoint.”

“What seemed to be a thing of the past, is back: we live again in a divided continent... Festivals should help to overcome the continental rift with everything at their disposal,” the document adds.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EFA took an unprecedented step of cutting off their Russian members, as “a message towards the regime”, Briers told EURACTIV. "We close the frontiers for Russian publicity.”

“Like he uses sport to promote himself and his country, he does the same with culture,” Briers said, pointing to the fact that the welcome words of the program book of the Sochi Festival showcases are by Russian President Vladimir Putin, accompanied by his picture.

At the same time, Briers stressed that the EFA embraces members outside the European Union, including Lebanese, Iraqi, Irani and Turkish festivals.

“The fact that we are here in Armenia is because every two years we want to go to a country where it's important that we support culture and the freedom of culture,” Briers said. “Also in the region where it's difficult for the moment”, he adds.

The escalation of decades-old hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan on Tuesday (13 September) has fuelled fears that a second full-fledged war could break out in Europe's neighbourhood in addition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Armenia is a member of the Moscow-led security pact, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), although Yerevan is dissatisfied with the lacklustre support of the Kremlin, which strives to maintain friendly relations with non-member Azerbaijan, and acts as a power broker in the South Caucasus region.

The uncomfortable reality of Europe's contested identity and colonial present can be felt on the walk through the Russian-flag-lined Northern Avenue of Armenia's capital to the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall, the venue of the summit's opening ceremony, accompanied by a concert by the country's star violinist Sergey Khachatryan and the State Symphony Orchestra.

The discomfort caused by Moscow's palpable presence in Yerevan is also felt by the summit participants, reflecting the difficult reality of cultural diplomacy.

Kateryna Lozenko, a Ukrainian musicologist and art manager of KharkivMusicFest, said she considered the risks when she took the flight to the Armenian capital.

“In general, the flag is not the worst thing I imagined [could] happen”, she told EURACTIV.

Yet, Lozenko stressed the importance of maintaining dialogue with her Armenian counterparts, in which she said she felt successful, despite the high level of Russian propaganda.

“And it is actually very important to make such contacts. Because obviously Armenia and Ukraine are not enemies of each other,” she told EURACTIV.

This sentiment is also echoed by Anastasia Yevsieieva, head of visual art at the Ukrainian Institute, a public organisation for cultural diplomacy affiliated with Ukraine's ministry of foreign affairs.

“We want the key world museums and society to understand what Ukraine has to do with the decolonial issue,” she said, highlighting that her nation's decolonisation needs to be put in the context of a country that has been living in a common informational space influenced by Russia with countries of the former Soviet Union.

“What was the impact of Russia? What was its influence and why we are trying to separate from that? It's not a question of the latest 200 days or eight years, Ukraine had been colonised by Russia for a long time. What we see right now is the natural process of Ukrainian society that is trying to separate from this colonial approach, to have its own voice and its own platform to respond to the situation,” she said.
WHILE international observers look ahead to Bangladesh’s next national election in December 2023, activists fear unrefracting Western support provided to Dhaka’s government could exacerbate recent anti-democratic trends.

“We have a situation where the definitely repressive regime is, to a large extent, propped up – or at least assisted – by large Western countries to serve their interests,” Shahidul Alam, a Bangladeshi festival maker, photojournalist and activist, told EURACTIV at a summit in Armenia.

Bangladesh, a country with a quarter of the EU’s total population at 164.7 million residents, has been governed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party since 2009.

Since Hasina and her party came to power, critics have accused the regime of rigging elections, restricting freedom of expression, violently suppressing opposition, and enabling extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances.

Alam, who has been an outspoken critic of the Bangladeshi government for many years, was arrested by local
police in 2018 after he criticised the regime's violent response to road safety protests on Facebook and in an interview with Al Jazeera, and allegedly tortured during his 108-day detention.

EU-Bangladesh relations

The EU is Bangladesh’s main trading partner, accounting for around 19.5% of Bangladesh’s total trade in 2020. Over the years, Brussels has encouraged the Bangladeshi government to implement electoral, human rights, and other reforms in the past, with limited success.

Between 2014 and 2020, the bloc supported the country with €655 million in humanitarian aid in order to help it achieve a number of goals relating to these areas.

In 2019, the EU issued an ultimatum to force the government’s hand on implementing labour reforms in order to continue getting preferential EU trade treatment, but electoral reforms were not included in the nine-point action plan that the two parties eventually agreed to.

According to Alam, Western countries, including EU member states, “talk about democracy and freedom, [but] in practice, they’re far more comfortable with a planned dictator who can be managed and who can be pushed into serving their interests.”

Europe’s disinterest in addressing the Bangladeshi government’s behaviour would stem from Dhaka delivering on the West’s fight against terrorism and accepting over a million refugees to keep them “from landing on the doorstep […] of Europe,” Alam said.

In Bangladesh, over 919,000 Rohingya refugees live in precarious and deteriorating conditions, with a majority located in congested Cox’s Bazar refugee camps.

Beyond taking a less aggressive approach to addressing the democratic backsliding that has taken place in Bangladesh in recent years, the West would also actively support the government’s crackdown on opposition groups, he added.

As evidence of this support, Alam pointed to German companies selling surveillance technology to the Rapid Action Battalion, a Bangladeshi security force accused of committing extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, as well as the US and UK governments providing training to the same force.

Support for civil society

The EU currently provides financial support to some civil society organisations working to improve conditions in Bangladesh, but Alam believes that the EU overlooks groups combatting the country’s most pernicious problems.

“I think there is a mechanism of providing support for civil society, but that is only for certain areas,” he said. “We face an existential threat of average people dying and being disappeared every day – that is a higher priority for me than worrying about […] a whole range of things.”

However, for many kinds of Bangladeshi civil society organisations, institutional barriers make work more challenging. Those that register as non-profits – and are therefore eligible to apply for EU and other foreign aid – are put under strict scrutiny by the government, which has more power to censor and control organisations with this designation.

Others, meanwhile, opt to register as corporations and enjoy more freedom of speech but are then ineligible for foreign support.

“In a country where not-for-profits are so controlled by the regime, you’ve actually created a situation that, by agreeing to support people, you’ve removed their ability to resist,” Alam said.

“On the other hand, there are people resisting, fighting the good fight,” he added. “These are people starved of those very same resources, people who could do a lot more, with a lot less, who could be a lot more effective in the long run.”

By not pushing harder for the Bangladeshi government to adopt electoral reforms and give non-profit NGOs more autonomy, Alam argues, the EU and its allies are exacerbating the problems facing the country in order to stay in the government’s good graces, at the expense of the Bangladeshi people themselves.

“Europe […] is forgetting that through this action, it might well be in the good books or be able to have a cohabitation with our government, but it has lost the confidence of the people,” he said.
While skyrocketing inflation threatens the European cultural sector still reeling from the pandemic, some European cities are making a bet on festivals as a way to increase their social and economic resilience.

Despite the cultural and artistic value of festival-making having long been recognised, many fear for the industry in light of skyrocketing prices. However, such crisis periods may be an opportune moment for smaller venues to attract bigger artists to cities willing to make that bet, stakeholders point out.

In European Festivals Association (EFA) President Jan Briers’ view, European governments propped up festivals during the difficult period of the pandemic at a time when events gathering large crowds were prohibited, in stark contrast to the financial crisis, during which the cultural sector was neglected.

“Also today, we still feel that. The need for culture, for artistic creativity, and the need to come closer to each other, it’s thanks to COVID,” Briers said.

According to the veteran festival-maker, the pandemic restrictions resulted in many great artists no longer seeking big venues, and increasingly willing to play smaller concerts, not least because it is also a way to interact more intimately with their audience.

However, much is left uncertain in the context of rapid inflation, and festival organisers are already seeing a 25% increase in overall costs, a number likely to continue rising.
“What that means, with the energy crisis? I don't know, it's too early to say,” Briers told EURACTIV.

“That's the kind of solidarity we had in the past, why shouldn't we have it now?” he said.

Some cities are already making the choice to systemically stand behind cultural events. During EFA's 70th anniversary Arts Festivals Summit in Yerevan this month, the association launched the 'Europe for festivals, festivals for Europe' (EFFE) Seal, for festival cities and regions, an initiative meant to develop exchanges between festivals and their host communities that wish to associate and integrate their image and policy with a strong cultural entity.

Belgrade, Bergen, Edinburgh, Ghent, Krakow, Leeuwarden and Ljubljana are seven cities that have been testing the EFFE Seal in the trial run and have stepped up to be among the first to receive the label.

“Cities and festivals need to connect with each other. The community will gain a soul, unparalleled experience or understanding of something greater than themselves”, Ragni Stoltenberg, advisor at the department of culture of Bergen said.

In the municipal official’s view, the initiative will help market the city as a cultural festival city, while providing a good framework for supporting the city’s festivals.

For Robert Piaskowski, responsible for culture at the municipality of Krakow, “cities are mirrors of festivals and vice versa,” organically interdependent, providing language and awareness about diversity with the potential of accelerating processes important for cities.

“We don't believe festivals are only fireworks or some events over the year, but they are national social movements for change,” he said.

Others point to the unique ability of festivals’ network capital, which can help communities in unexpected ways during the devastation of war.

Oleksandr Butsenko from the Development Centre ‘Democracy through Culture’ said that festivals keep going even during Russia’s war on Ukraine as “a very important tool for inspiring refugees coming from different parts of the country and festival workers now are working as cultural therapists.”

Representatives from Ukraine also pointed out the ability of festivals to help the war effort by leveraging their organisational skills and networks in order to mobilise and deliver humanitarian aid, while acting as a rallying point for communities facing severe hardships.

Kateryna Lozenko, a Ukrainian musicologist and art manager of KharkivMusicFest said when the organisers were forced to cancel the festival initially set to open at the end of March in light of the Russian offensive and shelling, they opted to nonetheless have a symbolic opening event later in the metro.

The tunnels were chosen as the safest venue at that point, giving a home to some city inhabitants for two months.

After finding a string quintet of local musicians, KharkivMusicFest held a small concert, which according to Lozenko was important for both those living in the metro and residents who have already fled the city.

“Because when you're in the underground without sunlight, without fresh air, without any of the basic amenities that you’re used to, you just have day and night, and it all blends into one surreal picture”, she said.

For those who have already fled, the event was “a small hope that they will come back to their homes. There will still be a regular life with concerts, with festivals,” she added.

“Even for me, it was important that the city lives, that the city continues. It is not broken.”
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