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# **Art Festivals: A Bridge Between Kosovo and Serbia**

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## Introduction

In the middle of the Balkans, where the shadows of past conflicts still linger, the power of art emerges as a hope for reconciliation. Art festivals between Kosovo and Serbia have become vital platforms for fostering dialogue, understanding, and artist exchange. Those festivals bring together participants from both Kosovo and Serbia as a form of collaboration between divided entities. Although those festivals' main purpose is art it can also be used as a platform for building bridges between communities with a history of conflict.

Art festivals such as the "Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! Festival", "Dokufest", "Artpolis" and others have emerged as significant cultural events that encourage cross-border interaction and collaboration. Those festivals not only showcase a diverse layer of artistic expressions, but these festivals also provide a space for dialogue, mutual respect, and shared experiences. They play a crucial role in breaking down stereotypes and promoting cultural diplomacy.

Despite their potential, these art festivals face numerous challenges, including political tensions, logistical barriers, and funding constraints.

This policy paper aims to analyze the role of art festivals in fostering reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia. It will explore the chronicle track record and policy context of these festivals, their social and political impacts, and provide policy recommendations so their effect can reach a broader audience.

By highlighting the importance of legislative systems from the two countries, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to promote peace and understanding through art. It emphasizes the need for a collaborative approach with the help of not only non-governmental organizations and artists willing to do something but also support from government institutions, international stakeholders to maintain and expand these artistic and cultural initiatives.

Providing a platform for cultural exchange and creative expression, these festivals can help to break down barriers and artist growth.

## Contextual Background of Art Festivals Between Kosovo and Serbia

The relationship between Kosovo and Serbia has been complex, marked by ethnic tensions and political disputes. However, the arts have consistently served as a bridge, offering a platform for dialogue and understanding. In recent years, art festivals have emerged as crucial spaces for collaborations between these separated cultural ties.

Starting with Mirëdita, Dobar Dan Festival a festival that has been taking place every year since 2014, this festival merges the art, culture, advocacy, and public debate in one platform, which makes it a unique platform for people participating in it. Founded by YIHR organization which was established in 2003 as a non-governmental organization, and later transformed into a regional network of organizations based in Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The Miredita Dobar dan Festival features a diverse program, including theater performances, film screenings, art exhibitions, and panel discussions, all aimed at fostering mutual understanding and respect. Although there were smaller initiatives in the years prior, the Miredita Dobar Dan Festivals marks the first major event in which people from Kosovo and Serbia can be brought together in the form of an art festival. Since then, more opportunities are rising as ways to facilitate artistic exchange and collaboration, even amid political and logistical barriers.

The DokuFest, International Documentary and Short Film Festival, which is the largest film festival in Kosovo. The festival was founded in 2002, held in Prizren DokuFest has a selection of more than 200 hand-picked films from around the world. Since 2019, DokuFest has earned the esteemed status of being a BAFTA qualifying festival for short films, and a year after they collaborated in a project called “How Do I See You ” which is a collaborative project between DokuFest and Slobodna Zona festivals, aiming to establish a connection between the youth of Kosovo and Serbia through an educational and comprehensive program. The collaboration between these two festivals was not the first. Through the “Future is Here” program by Dokufest, young filmmakers had the opportunity to create short documentaries and premiere their work in both countries. Young

filmmakers from Kosovo have the chance to showcase these documentaries at the Slobodna Zona Festival, a festival that gathers thousands of visitors each year.

The “How Do I See You” program is funded by the European Union and implemented by DokuFest and Foundation Fund B92 throughout the project implementation, the staff collects press clippings reporting events in each country. These materials then are curated into an exhibition showcased at festivals in Prizren and Belgrade annually. Additionally, the project aims to develop a joint online platform to share at least 100 two-minute stories and media reports. Increase of other programs from art festivals can be seen in recent years such as Artpolis which have their yearly Feminist Summer School Under the motto “Young women build peace”, they gather 18 girls from Kosovo and Serbia, in Varnjačka Banja/Serbia. Within four days, the young women of the Feminist Spring School discussed peace building, women’s activism in the early years, the consequences of war and the treatment of survivors, solidarity but also for art in activism, as a practical and empowering form of peace building.

Each year those art festivals between Kosovo and Serbia have experienced growth, both in scale and impact. These programs have expanded their programs to include a wider array of artistic disciplines such as music, theater, film, visual arts, and literature. The increasing participation of artists, audiences, and cultural practitioners from both regions is a testament to their growing popularity and importance.

A key factor contributing to the growth of these festivals is the support from international organizations and donors. Institutions such as the European Union, UNESCO, USAID and various international cultural foundations have provided substantial financial assistance, logistical support, and expertise. These international funds have enabled festival organizers to improve the quality and scope of their events, attract renowned artists, and reach a broader audience.

While art festivals between Kosovo and Serbia play a vital role in fostering cultural exchange and reconciliation, they face numerous challenges that can hinder their effectiveness. The ongoing political tensions between Kosovo and Serbia create an unstable environment that can affect the planning and execution of art festivals. These tensions often lead to bureaucratic delays, restrictions on movement, and a general atmosphere

of uncertainty that can discourage participation from both artists and audiences. In 2022, the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan cultural festival, held in Belgrade from May 25 to 28, faced high alert and uncertainty due to protests and bomb threats from Serbian nationalists. Unlike as in previous years, there were no strict police controls, although the Kosovo team arrived under the supervision of the Serbian police. Outside, small groups of protesters sang Serbian nationalist songs, while the police interrupted the opening ceremony after a false bomb alarm was sent to the cultural decontamination center. Although those challenges can have a lump on the effective progress that the festival has, they still mark a successful progress to showcase art from the two countries.

For many Albanians from Kosovo and Serbians these art festivals provide a unique chance to cross the border and experience the neighboring country firsthand. These festivals are often the first time that attendees have set foot in each other's territories, allowing them to see beyond the mediated images and narratives. Personal interactions during these festivals, such as conversations with local artists, collaborative workshops are an entrance where people first interact with the other countries which sets an experience that participants can create based on those interactions. Despite the challenges of political tensions, funding constraints, and societal resistance, the continued growth and support of these festivals demonstrate their significant impact on building bridges between communities. With sustained efforts from NGOs, international organizations, and dedicated individuals, art festivals can continue to play a pivotal role in promoting peace and cultural unity in the Balkans.

## Navigating Challenges and Resilience for Art Festivals

Despite the many challenges art festivals face, events like Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! have emerged as critical platforms for fostering dialogue and reconciliation between communities. However, these festivals face significant obstacles, including political resistance, security concerns, and logistical difficulties. To illustrate the severity of the issues faced by these festivals, we can refer to the insights provided by the Director of Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) Serbia MS. Sofija Todorović during an interview about the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! festival. The Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! Festival was founded in 2014 with the help of the NGO Integra Kosovo as an

inspiration was actor Bekim Femi. ( June 1936 - 15 June 2010) He is one of the best-known ethnic Albanian actors internationally, with most of his work during the Yugoslav era in theater and film. He was the first Eastern European actor to star in Hollywood during the Cold War. The inspiration for the festival came right after the Brussels Agreement in 2013 which agreed on the integration of Serb-majority municipalities in North Kosovo into the Kosovo legal system. By proceeding this festival the aim was to contribute to the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia through cooperation and artistic exchange. By showcasing contemporary art from both regions, the festival seeks to engage the public in meaningful cultural dialogue. What distinguishes this festival is that it is not only an art event; it also incorporates a debate program which addresses the most pressing issues and topics relevant to the year in which the festival is held, fostering important discussions alongside artistic presentations. As the festival progressed it has garnered increased investment not only from artists and the general public but also from political figures. In its second year, Aleksandar Vučić expressed support for the festival by facilitating the use of public spaces for the event. Furthermore, in 2016, an open letter from both Edi Rama and Aleksandar Vučić was read at the opening ceremony of the festival, signaling strong political backing and emphasizing the importance of the festival in fostering cultural and political dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. In 2017 the former president of Kosovo at the time Atifete Jahjaga , was supposed to participate in the Festival, but refused to come to Belgrade because the authorities in Serbia did not provide her with an escort and security. Despite the involvement of high-profile political figures, the festival has consistently faced protests. The protests increased in 2017, with Serbian football hooligans being the most prominent among the protesters during that year's edition. From its inception until 2021, the festival was held in Serbia, often marred by increasing protests and operational challenges. However, in 2021, the festival took place for the first time in Pristina, where it was conducted smoothly without any incidents, in contrast to the experiences in Belgrade.

When asked about the biggest challenge in organizing art festivals between Kosovo and Serbia, Ms. Todorović, the Director of YIHR, identified nationalistic politics as the primary obstacle. Most of the challenges arise in Serbia, where there is a significant presence of nationalist sentiment and annual protests against the festival. In difference when organizing the festival in Kosovo tends to be easier. For instance, in 2023, following the



mass shooting in Serbian schools, there was an event in Kosovo where people lit candles in solidarity with the young victims who died in May 2023, demonstrating a supportive and cooperative environment for the festival.

## Funding and Support from International Stakeholders for Art Festivals

The program with the events of not only Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! but also other art Festivals rely on financial support and collaboration from international stakeholders. Securing funding is a perpetual challenge for organizers due to limited local resources and economic constraints. International grants and donations often fill this gap, providing essential financial backing to sustain festival operations. Organizations like the European Union, various cultural foundations, and diplomatic missions contribute significantly to the festival's budget. Their support ensures the viability of diverse programming, artist fees, venue rentals, and logistical arrangements. Beyond financial aid, international stakeholders offer in-kind contributions and partnerships that enhance festival quality and reach. This includes providing technical equipment, logistical support, promotional efforts, and expertise in cultural management. Collaborations with international cultural institutions and artist networks facilitate cross-border exchanges, enriching the festival's program with diverse perspectives and artistic innovations. International stakeholders also play a crucial role in advocating for the festival's significance on the global stage. Diplomatic engagements and endorsements from foreign countries lend credibility and visibility to the festival, attracting broader audiences and fostering international recognition. Their financial support, in-kind contributions, advocacy efforts, and capacity-building initiatives are indispensable in overcoming logistical and political challenges. By nurturing collaborative partnerships and securing sustainable funding, these stakeholders empower the festival to fulfill its mission of promoting cultural exchange, fostering understanding, and bridging divides in the region. Although there are some small funds provided by local organizations, these funds are often insufficient to cover the extensive costs associated with organizing art festivals. From securing venues to compensating artists and managing logistical operations, the financial demands are substantial. Therefore, the reliance on international funding becomes crucial for ensuring the

successful execution of these cultural events. Local organizations and cultural institutions, while supportive, have limited financial capabilities due to competing priorities and economic constraints within their respective budgets. Their contributions often focus on in-kind support or modest financial assistance rather than covering major operational costs. Organizations such as cultural foundations, diplomatic missions, and international NGOs provide grants that sustain festival operations and enable organizers to expand their outreach efforts. Adequate funding allows festivals to curate diverse and innovative programming that reflects both local cultural identities and global artistic trends. This diversity not only enriches audience experiences but also fosters meaningful exchanges between artists and attendees.

Sustainable funding strategies are essential for the long-term viability of art festivals. International stakeholders contribute to sustainability by investing in capacity-building initiatives, organizational development, and strategic planning that strengthen festival management and resilience.

## **Current Situation: Art Festivals at Risk Amid Political Conflicts**

Political conflicts between Kosovo and Serbia have a direct impact on the cultural landscape, including art festivals. These conflicts can lead to diplomatic standoffs, nationalist sentiments, and sometimes outright bans or restrictions on cultural events that involve participation from both sides. Such actions not only hinder cultural exchange but also perpetuate division and misunderstanding. In recent years whenever a festival event was set during periods of heightened conflict, there is often a noticeable decline in participation in art festivals. Fear of safety, political pressure, and boycotts contribute to reduced attendance from both local and international audiences. Artists and participants may face challenges in travel and logistics, further limiting the diversity and vibrancy of festival programming. In a recent development, this year the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! festival faced a significant setback when it was banned by the Serbian government. This ban underscores the vulnerability of cultural events to political decisions and highlights the challenges of maintaining cultural dialogue in a polarized environment. A police statement cited security concerns as the reason to ban the "Mirdita, dobar dan" event that was scheduled to start in Belgrade with a theater show from Kosovo. The

decision to ban the festival not only deprived audiences in Serbia of cultural exchange opportunities but also sent a discouraging message to international stakeholders and artists invested in cross-border cooperation. Despite these challenges, art festivals continue to play a crucial role in cultural diplomacy and resilience. Organizers, artists, and international stakeholders remain committed to promoting dialogue and understanding through artistic expression. Efforts to navigate political barriers, secure alternative venues, and adapt programming demonstrate the resilience of the cultural community in the face of adversity. When asked Ms. Todorović, the Director of YIHR, about the future aspirations for the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! Festival, her primary goal is for the festival to continue thriving despite the challenges it faces. The recent ban highlights the setbacks encountered in fostering progress through cultural exchange initiatives. However, Sofija remains steadfast in her commitment to overcoming such obstacles and sees the festival's resilience as a testament to its importance in promoting peace and understanding.

Banning art festivals like Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! represents a significant setback for cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding between Kosovo and Serbia. Such actions not only suppress artistic expression but also delay opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation. Art festivals serve as platforms for bridging divides and fostering empathy among communities. Banning them undermines efforts to promote tolerance and cooperation, perpetuating divisions and reinforcing stereotypes. Furthermore it sends a negative message to international stakeholders and undermines the region's cultural vibrancy and potential for peaceful coexistence.

Despite the setbacks caused by the banning of art festivals, there is still hope for their future. The resilience of cultural organizers and international support demonstrates a commitment to overcoming obstacles. Art has a unique ability to transcend political boundaries and foster connections. Efforts to promote cultural exchange and understanding remain steadfast, driven by the belief that shared artistic experiences can bridge divides. By advocating for artistic freedom and continuing to engage in dialogue, stakeholders can work towards reinstating festivals like Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! and advancing reconciliation efforts in Kosovo and Serbia.

## Conclusion and Closing

In conclusion, art festivals have emerged as vital platforms for fostering dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia. These festivals transcend the boundaries of artistic expression, serving as catalysts for social and political engagement. Despite facing significant obstacles, including political resistance, security concerns, and logistical difficulties, the resilience of organizers, participants, and supporters highlights the unwavering commitment to cultural diplomacy and mutual respect.

The insights provided by interviews, underscore the critical role these festivals play in promoting peace and cooperation. The challenges posed by nationalistic politics and frequent protests, particularly in Serbia, underscore the ongoing struggle to maintain these platforms for dialogue.

The involvement of political figures and international stakeholders further emphasizes the importance of these festivals in fostering cultural and political dialogue. The continued investment from artists, the public, and political leaders indicates a growing recognition of the value of these cultural exchanges. The examples of solidarity and support from both Kosovo and Serbia in response to tragic events, such as the mass shooting in Serbian schools, highlight the potential for art festivals to build bridges and foster empathy between communities.

Looking ahead, the aspirations of young artists who attend these festivals, as well as the ongoing efforts to secure stable funding and support, will be crucial in sustaining and expanding the impact of these cultural events. The inclusion of an infographic detailing the yearly attendance of the Mirëdita, Dobar Dan! festival will provide a visual representation of the festival's growth and progress over the years.

In closing, the ongoing commitment to promoting cultural exchange and understanding through art festivals remains a beacon of hope for the future. By continuing to navigate the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities for collaboration, these festivals can further their mission of fostering peace and reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia. The resilience and dedication of all involved ensure that the spirit of dialogue and cultural appreciation will endure, paving the way for a more harmonious and interconnected region.

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