

Leadership in independent art organisations: Entrepreneurship and Regional embeddedness

Milena Stefanović, University of Arts, Belgrade

Milena Dragičević Šešić, University of Arts, Belgrade

Autobiographical note

Dr. Milena Dragičević Šešić, Prof emerita, University of Arts, Faculty of Drama Arts, Belgrade, Serbia
milena.dragicevicsesic@fdu.bg.ac.rs, ORCID - 0000-0003-2107-292X

Dr. Milena Stefanović, Assistant professor, University of Arts, Faculty of Drama Arts, Belgrade, Serbia
milena.stefanovic@fdu.bg.ac.rs ORCID 0009-0005-0959-8349

Dr. Milena Dragičević Šešić; the UNESCO expert. Published 20 books, translated in 20 languages. Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Palmes Academiques 2003. ENCATC fellowship laureate 2019. University of Arts Laureate 2004, 2019. Doctor Honoris Causa University of Montpellier 2023.

Dr. Milena Stefanović, Main research fields: strategic management and leadership, organizational culture and behavior, organizational/institutional memory. Experienced manager with demonstrated history of working in the civil sector, academia and business. Skilled in Strategic management, Public affairs, Policy analysis and International relations.

Abstract

The lack of honest and transparent social and regional intercultural and intergovernmental dialogue in the Western Balkans region¹ is evident. The number of international (mostly externally driven) political cooperation instruments and initiatives has flourished in the last ten years (Berlin Process, Open Balkans, Common Regional Market), while the number of bilateral disputes has remained stable. While mostly linked to "dissonant heritage" and cultural/political memory issues, these disputes are raising deeper expressions of hatred (discourse of hate in official communication and performative acts). At the same time, the establishment of the Common Regional Market is underway, and one of the most important agreements regarding the common labor market of Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia came into force in 2024. In such a complex and dialectical context, organizations operating in the field of cultural, creative, and socio-cultural entrepreneurship are using different, even risky, methods, strategies, and creative approaches to achieve organizational objectives by investing in collaborative programs and projects, while daring to deal with conflictual issues. Leadership in such a populist ecosystem requires courage, vision, and diplomacy skills to overcome challenges that threaten to sabotage democracy and the promotion of values such as diversity, freedom of speech, and human rights.

Key words: entrepreneurship, leadership, socio-cultural entrepreneurship, cultural management, Western Balkans.

Introduction

Leadership and entrepreneurship are terms that are not often present in public discourse in the area of arts and culture. In general, both terms are associated with business practices and the market approach to arts, thus cultural workers are reluctant to use those terms or even to be associated with. On the other hand, the realities of cultural policy and financial instruments available inevitably are pushing many operators in the field to initiate and to create new ventures that are in essence entrepreneurial. It goes for all agents in the field, except for those in publicly financed and subsidized sector (their position is secured by `non-doing` just applying routine governance). However, even among them we could differentiate a few of entrepreneurial, ambitious leaders trying to leave individual mark on institutions they lead (i.e. Ivan Tasovac, late director of the Belgrade Philharmonics; Tijana Palkovljević Bugarski, director of Gallery of Matica Srpska Novi Sad).

The subject of this paper are modalities and types of entrepreneurship and leadership models in independent cultural sector: private and civic, the second usually perceived as non-profit. We are having in mind two contextual perspectives: current political and social context, and inherited practices, self-perceptions and heritage from so called socialist period (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, 1945-1992).

The starting hypothesis are twofold, first group are related to the character of entrepreneurial initiatives or how entrepreneurs and leaders perceive and define their activities that are in intersection of cultural and social field, while others are related to impetus for initiating new forms, and the leadership practices and styles.

First group of hypothesis are based on notion that entrepreneurs in culture and arts do have social responsibility and tendency to create public value. Thus, the first group of hypothesis says that socio cultural entrepreneurship use

- a) Art practices to address societal problems and deficiencies in the Western Balkans region (the geographical region where the activities are implemented).
- b) Societal problem is a basis for art projects and for other multidimensional programs.

Second hypothesis: the “local” context is a main drive for starting new initiatives, while expanding programs is motivated by emerging regional state of play.

Third hypothesis: Leadership in selected case studies mainly resides in values based leadership styles, that can be find in specific theories like transformational, authentic, servant, ethical, shared, etc.

Methodology is based on three case studies, that were developed on semi structured interviews with managers of selected organizations, and analysis of the available media materials. All three case studies originate from Serbia, however, all have regional scope of work. Specifically, our case studies are Heartefactⁱⁱ, Nisvilleⁱⁱⁱ, and Creative Mentorship^{iv}.

The theoretical framework that serves as the starting point for this research is based on theories of entrepreneurship and leadership. We approach the issue from these two theoretical perspectives, accepting Colbert's (2003) standpoint that entrepreneurship, marketing, and leadership are interconnected, and that in order to be successful, entrepreneur must have leadership skills. In most cases of cultural leadership and entrepreneurship, the main goal is programming and organizational development. This allows not only for market development, as in business, but also, and more importantly, for institutional profile development and the creation of public value, which is considered to be in the public interest.

It should be noted that socio-cultural-art entrepreneurship is not a new area of interest. However, there is no consolidated theory in this field, although in the last ten years, scholars from different disciplines have been rediscovering entrepreneurial features in arts and culture. Despite this, theoretical

frameworks are still needed to help academics and scholars to explain the general processes, phases, methods, and the relationships between culture, art, the social sphere, and innovation.

We are inspired by specific research (Birnkraut, 2015) exploring the identity building of cultural entrepreneurs. The study, conducted in the USA and Germany, shows how entrepreneurs did not have "a label" under which they would categorize their enterprises until definitions were explained. All identified themselves first as cultural and then as social entrepreneurs (Birnkraut, 2017). Many scholars argue that entrepreneurship cannot be taught (Corbett, 2012), while others have been critical of the lack of theory guiding entrepreneurship education and practice (Chandler and Lyon, 2001).

Among these lines, we explore cultural and social aspects, the context as an impetus, and the leadership approaches needed after the first entrepreneurial phase to keep organizations alive and growing.

Defining the framework

Schumpeter's book "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy" (1942) described entrepreneur as someone who creates something new and innovative, and many other definitions followed, focusing mainly in entrepreneurship endeavours in area of small and medium business.

In the 1990s, concept of social entrepreneurship emerged, with Leadbeater's book "The Rise of Social Entrepreneur" (1997). Years later, cultural and arts entrepreneurship started to be discussed and developed (Dragičević Šešić 1999, Hagoort 2003, Beckman 2007, Mandel 2007, Varbanova 2013).

Still, the theories about cultural and arts entrepreneurship are scarce. For example, Hagoort (2003) points out three elements of cultural entrepreneurship: clear cultural vision, market orientation with emphasis on innovation and social responsibility. Varbanova (2013) claims that long-term goal of creative entrepreneurship is to achieve economic, creative and social results, and says: "Entrepreneurship in arts and culture is an economic as well as sociocultural activity, based on innovation, exploitation of opportunities and risk taking behaviour".

If we were to draw a line between social and cultural entrepreneurship, we could say that the mission distinguishes social entrepreneurship: it involves building or transforming institutions to achieve solutions for various social problems, such as human rights issues and environmental destruction. (Bornstein and Davis, 2010).

Cultural entrepreneurship on the other hand, has much wider context and cultural entrepreneurs can be defined as cultural change agents who organize cultural, financial, social and human capital to generate revenue from cultural activity (Anheier and Yudhishtir, 2008, according to Birnkraut). This definition distinguish cultural entrepreneur as someone who is not being focused on artistic processes itself but rather on cultural change in broader sense.

Leadership is one of the most researched fields in organizational studies. The theories evolved over time, and scholars are constantly looking into new constructs, styles and features, trying to grasp and construct leadership frameworks as interaction between situation, behaviour, personal characteristics, and values. Contemporary context or simply put, the reality, motivated and provoked scholars to research beyond charismatic, visionary, transactional leadership styles, and to look into ethical and moral aspects of the issue, that generated new variants of leadership theories (Anderson and Sun, 2015). These two authors, reviewed overlaps in leadership styles theories, and extensively discussed emerging literature on these new styles, that are looking beyond usual and dominant charismatic/transformational and transactional framework (2015, 76).

As noted, numerous corporative scandals and leadership cases of power abuse caused emerging interest in values based leadership (VBL) that is still relatively new area of research (Fulford and Coleman, 2022, according to Abay, Gomes and Mengistu 2023). Mentioned scholars also say that the terms "values-oriented, values-centred, or value based" leadership are used interchangeably as a roof term for

various theories focusing on the moral, authentic, principled, and ethical dimensions of leadership (Abay, Gomes and Mengistu, 2023).

According to Dames (2014), the term “values based leadership” refers to leadership qualities within ethical, spiritual, servant, and transformational leadership theories. Meanwhile, in a recent study, Bano et al. (2020) stated that VBL has ethical, authentic, and moral dimensions. Sumanasiri (2020) claimed that VBL constitutes different specific leadership styles like shared leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, authentic leadership, connective leadership, self-sacrificial leadership, ethical leadership, and transformational leadership. According to Hendrikz and Engelbrecht (2019), the most significant leadership theories that have moral behaviours and should be regarded as VBL are transformational, servant, authentic and ethical leadership. While Copeland (2014) and Berger (2013) argued that VBL can only be observed on authentic, ethical, and transformational leadership theories.

It is evident that scholars do not agree on which leadership theories actually form a values-based approach, although most of them include ethical, transformational, and authentic leadership styles. Thus, the definition we will accept as a starting point for this research is that values-based leadership (VBL) is based on foundational moral principles or values such as integrity, empowerment, and social responsibility (Viinamäki, 2012). We agree that different leadership theories, like transformational, ethical, authentic, and servant leadership, encompass values-based leadership frameworks. In the WB context, where traditional values of collective, shared leadership extend beyond their usual meaning in the Global North, we will explore the influence of contextual values on values-based leadership traits.

Context is everything

One thing is certain: all the countries in the Western Balkans, have their own variants of national and regional or shared history, creating narratives around it^v. National identities are one of the most prominent topics in political debates in all countries, and the rise of national identity politics in all countries is polarizing the region even more.

In the last twenty years, social and political context in the Western Balkan countries can be named as transitional in many aspects. Democratisation processes started after the conflicts in the nineties, and all of the countries tried to shape or to re-build national identities, by introducing different policies and narratives. Political systems varied from partial democracy to stabilitocracy (Bieber, 2017) ranging from “partocracy” to so-called “hybrid regimes” (Freedom House Report, 2021). Political elites mostly practiced populist cultural policies using all available resources: institutional, financial, political, and mostly, public media (Dragičević Šešić and Vickery 2017; Dragičević Šešić and Nikolić 2019).

However, there were short windows of time in which societies experienced phases of more open and inclusive systems and this only depended on the ruling political forces. Thus, the narratives of co-existence, inclusion, diversity, opening and cooperation were welcomed, and because of external support for regional cooperation through different financial and political instruments, the number of new multidisciplinary initiatives emerged. However, such democratic and one could say “European” values were not rooted, accepted or widespread enough to become *sine qua non* of specific state setting. Thus, organizations and individual change makers operating in the framework of these values, struggled and had to find courage and diplomatic skills to keep overcoming unfriendly environment. This notion could be applied for all six of the Western Balkans countries in certain phases, although the degree of openness to cooperation and opportunities for that varied. For example, due to the political system that has different layers of governance, like Bosnia and Herzegovina, democratic principles were more difficult to be captured (Mujagić, Nermina 2017), while in Montenegro, the level of democratic culture was higher and remains stable (Milačić, 2019).

To sum up, shared violent past, and unresolved bilateral disputes make the Western Balkans a problematic region under the scrutiny of external players. The point where the interests of all the countries of the Western Balkans can coincide is European integration, which indicates the “common destiny” of this region (Djorić, 2023).

Besides internal-regional dynamics and disputes, the important factor that is influencing the political and social context, is geopolitics. Despite strong presence of the European Union in the region, different external players like Russia, China, Turkey, are present and influential, with different rhythms and engagements in different parts of the region (Marić, 2023, Dragičević Šešić, Henze and Rogač Mijatović 2023, Durrer and Henze 2020, Mandel 2017).

In this respect especially important is the formal process of European accession, which is dominated by current geopolitical interests, goals and priorities of the Member States of the EU. For example, countries such as North Macedonia and Albania were for a very long time on the waiting list without obtaining candidate status – while new regions in the Eastern Partnership advanced in the accession process in speed time (Ukraine and Moldova). This dynamics is causing decline in WB states for accession and leaves space for other players to meddle. Altogether, the present situation, using Moisi (2010) term – geopolitics of emotion – is characterised by culture of fear and of humiliation, that impact heavily cultural policies and cultural governance, but also public opinion on European Union integration process. According to the Western Balkans regional poll conducted by International Republican Institute (February and March 2024) the support for joining the Union is declining in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and North Macedonia.

At the same time, in November 2022, when the six leaders of the Western Balkans have signed the agreements related to the Common Regional Market, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that “it is time to overcome regional conflicts, which have kept the region divided for a long time.” Despite reassuring and motivational political narratives coming from member states, the previously mentioned poll (IRI, 2024) shows high percentage of citizens that do not believe this is genuine and significant number of people that WB will never be part of the Union.

As announced, the leaders from the region signed four mobility Agreements: Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards, Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors of Medicine, Dentists and Architects, Recognition of the professional qualifications of nurses, veterinarians, pharmacists and midwives. All these, seems obsolete if we look into it through the EU lenses, because if the countries were members, they would not need specific Agreements like this. But, since it is not clear when the full membership will be the reality, these agreements at least help labour market to stay alive.

Thus, the regional context is coloured by geopolitics, bilateral disputes and rise of nationalistic politics that values national identity discourses. Serbia is the biggest country in the WB region, and probably the most influential for two reasons: the size of economy and because of percentage of Serbian minority residing in other countries (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Its cultural ecosystem is cornered between two political perspectives: the need for independent critical thinking and development of open and inclusive cultural model on one side, and on the other of national identity narratives, traditional values, as well as political and financial control, imposed by ruling political elites. The situation is very similar in other Western Balkan states, and independent critical voices and artists occasionally cooperate (Dragičević Šešić and Rogač Mijatović in Vickery, in print 2025) since they do see WB region with the same eyes.

Setting the scene: cultural entrepreneurs between public ignorance and neglect

To understand important changes in the conceptualisation and re-conceptualisation of the culture of entrepreneurship and attitudes toward leadership in the cultural sector, it is necessary to discuss changes in cultural policies that had happened since year 2000.

Between 2000 and 2012, Serbian cultural policy was characterized by attempts to create the first transparent democratic system with public cause for funding, evaluation, introduction of strategic planning, public calls for staff and leaders recruitment in public institutions, etc. Decentralisation of cultural life and acknowledgement of independent sector that contributed enormously to artistic life during the nineties,^{vi} at the same time enhanced European and regional cooperation. In parallel, these systemic efforts to develop new models of governance and management introduced ideas about cultural industries and creative sector, entrepreneurship, strategic planning, and their importance for national and local cultural policies and practices.

The period between 2008 and 2017, can be described as festivalization of culture, because most cultural events and activities were focused on different types of festivals. After 2017, there has been shift that one could predict, a shift toward enhancing national cultural identity, since grounds were visible in finally adopted in Government document, Strategy of cultural development in Republic of Serbia from 2020 – 2029.

The system referred as “command culture regime” introduced tools and policies centered on notions of Serbian heritage and history, where most visible, and biggest interventions were linked to re-creation of Serbian identity (i.e. Stefan Nemanja monument). The narratives used by political elites and decision makers were targeting national identity feelings, while independent scene was marginalized by the lack of financial or even declarative support. Practice of (self) censorship was present, and many independent organizations, initiatives, or projects, were struggling. Besides managerial paradigm of “market and performance”, an approach that has been imposed on cultural organizations, the other pressures were coming from populist policies which are asking for national responsibility, for the participation of artists and cultural sector in national identity creation processes (Dragicevic and Dragojevic 2006), not in designing European or any kind of other transcultural identities.

Despite all this, festivals were still dominant form, especially outside of Belgrade, even though most of them attracted audiences only once a year. As a separate phenomenon, there were several multidisciplinary organizations (CZKD, KC Grad, Hartefakt) that tried to critically address social and cultural realities, combining entrepreneurial management model, with activist and political (not politicized) themes, thus classifying itself as civil society sector with artistic and critical social perspectives. They were interesting also to international donors and the international community, since with such multidisciplinary approach they could wear different hats.

The (re)discovery of ‘civil society’ from the end of the 80s, with the focus on NGOs has brought new forms and functions for bringing about social change and the development of democratic society (Hirsch 2003: 8). As previously implied, in the Western Balkans region, independent cultural organizations were “discovered” in the 90ties during the Yugoslav conflicts, while after the democratic changes, their role and focus became wider and relevant for development of democratic values and activism.

Entrepreneurship and leadership approach – characteristics and features in three case studies

Entrepreneurial approach is new concept in the Serbian cultural and arts sector, and although the term is widely used in the public, usually it refers to small enterprises and female entrepreneurs (Stefanović, 2013). General perception is that for entrepreneurship one does not need formal education, since anyone could become entrepreneur. On the other hand, for working in the arts, cultural sector and even for creative industry, individuals must have some formal education in the related fields, either arts, management in culture, economy, literature, etc. Historically, there are a number of entrepreneurial spirits in culture that culture of memory embrace: from Stevan Majstorović, first cultural policy scholar that created Institute for Cultural Development to Mira Trailovic, the director-founder of festival BITEF, theatres Atelje 212 and Bitef theatre, etc. (Djukić, 2011, Dragičević Šešić, 2013).

On the other hand, in last ten years, the number of entrepreneurial initiatives operating in intersection between culture, arts, creative and social realm, are rising. Sometimes, although working on a non-profit basis, on a content level, they correspond to socio-cultural entrepreneurship.

In this section, we will present main features of three entrepreneurial initiatives that are grounded between social, cultural, and creative sector, combining different entrepreneurial and leadership strategies. Common denominator for all is also their regional scope of work, and that all belong to the same political and social context.

Heartefact – values based approach

Heartefact is, in administrative and formal terms, set up as a foundation and a multidisciplinary organization based in Belgrade. Its mission is to support the creation of a common cultural space in the Western Balkans through critical artistic practice. On the landing page, one can find the following statement: “Heartefact is dedicated to fostering a creative, critical, and responsible rethinking of emerging artistic, social, and political issues and phenomena at national, regional, and European levels. HF advocates new models of production, regional cooperation, and alternative forms of education.” It was founded by Andrej Nosov in 2009.

Heartefact is a typical example of an entrepreneurial endeavor by a person who had a vision and speculation about the future availability of resources to set up, develop, and later grow an organization in the artistic, social, and political realms. Before initiating Heartefact, Nosov worked in a prominent civil society organization (Youth Initiative for Human Rights), where he became sensitized to a wide range of issues pressing society, particularly around human rights and democracy.

As he explained, the regional context at that time was smeared by Kosovo Declaration on independence (February 2008), on the collapse, after two years, of negotiations between Priština and Belgrade (Džihić, Kramer, 2009). While Kosovo population was enthusiastic about the developments and the support from international community, gaining immediately recognition from 62 of 192 UN member states, and achieving membership of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, population in Serbia was disappointed and humiliation was dominant feeling. In such a polarized regional context, international players working via the donor community, independent cultural operators, and civil activists understood that the gap between societies would widen if someone did not initiate any sort of communication and cooperation

This unfavourable context was initial impetus for Nosov to recognise the opportunity is there and to start something new: multidisciplinary initiative that would create non-divisive frameworks for communication, in which contemporary drama texts and plays would be the core product. In 2010, Heartefact opened its office in Priština. The structure of Heartefact developed over the years by introducing multilayer governance, which was also a novelty for the cultural sector. The organizational strategy has been assessed and accordingly adapted every two or three years to follow the political and social changes occurring in the region.

The research showed that Heartefact is a par excellence example of socio-cultural entrepreneurship that emerged from the bottom up, with its destiny essentially defined by the political and social context. Over time, besides the values of cooperation, other social goals and values emerged as relevant for creating artistic works. The most prominent one was the value of tolerance. In 2014, Heartefact established a new program called the “Festival of Tolerance,” which later grew into the Heartefact Festival. Negative perceptions and stigma around the LGBT population were prominent (and still are present), and acceptance of differences was a pressing issue.

No matter what kind of societal problem was the basis for art projects, the first goal was always artistic excellence, as Nosov says. On the other hand, with the introduction of educational programs about the problems the region was facing, Heartefact was expanding the scope of potential audiences that were not always from the mainstream. Specifically, with the “Reconnection” program, they aimed to attract participants from the nationalistic, right-wing ideology circles, where cooperation was not the primary goal, but rather understanding and learning about each other. "...while trying to teach them to think outside of the box" (Nosov, 2024).

The entrepreneur, but also a leader, can be described as a cultural change-maker and social influencer, practicing a values-based leadership style. Although without much formal managerial education when he created Heartefact (he is a theatre director by education), it was clear that besides his entrepreneurial character, Nosov had leadership potential, both in charisma and in a clear vision.

The Obama Foundation selected Nosov as a promising young leader, recognizing talent and achievements that are making a mark for regional cooperation. As he stated, the program he attended gave him opportunities to widen his leadership potential and to develop a transformational leadership style. During the research, we recognized elements of servant leadership (Anderson, Sun, 2015), specifically creating value for the community defined as 'the extent to which leaders prepare an organization to make a positive contribution to society,' and authenticity as being true to oneself, accurately reflecting public and private selves. These elements could also be found in the authentic style of leadership, and since some of the models and features overlap, we consider the leadership style of Nosov as values-based, with authentic and transformational dominance.

Nisville (Nišvil) – regional popularity matters

Established in 1995, the International Nisville Jazz Festival became one of the most well-known festivals in Southeast Europe over the years, putting the city of Niš on the map of summer destinations. Niš is located in the southern part of Serbia, with around 200,000 inhabitants, close to neighboring North Macedonia and Bulgaria. According to New Europe magazine, it 'has consistently defended European values of multiculturalism, while patiently fostering the musical taste of individuals.' The format of the festival is such that the core content of jazz concerts lasts around three days each August, while for about ten days before and after, books, theater plays, comic art, and movies are on display (Nisvil Jazz Theatre, Nisville Movie Summit, etc).

Founded and led by Ivan Blagojević, the organization itself is active throughout the year with a permanent team of 8-10 members. Besides Blagojević, Maja Mitić, artistic director of the jazz theatre festival that is a sub-festival within Nisville, plays a crucial role in the growth strategy. However, in the time when festival was established, Blagojević had a courage, vision and he recognized the need for specific music festival that will connect musicians and artists from the region, that are not part of the mainstream music culture.

It could be said that Nisville festival is example of cultural entrepreneurship, while expanding program towards different social groups, and addressing specific societal problems is in line with our first groups of hypothesis about socio-cultural entrepreneurship. However, Blagojević realised that to overcome the “local” and niche character of the festival, he had to diversify and enlarge the program portfolio. In practice, it meant creating sub-sections or sub-programs dedicated fully to theatre art (since 2017) or creating the Museum of Jazz at the Niš Fortress where the festival takes place. This strategy led to absolute success, and the Festival became place to be during August for many people leaving in the

south part of the Western Balkans, but also for those living in Bulgaria and Greece. The number of external guests are rising, and city economy is benefiting from Nisville more than expected.

Furthermore, while art and culture goals were primary motives when the initiative started, the context caused expansion of the program towards other forms of arts that are including marginalized groups, like Roma. Specifically, value of collaboration between young jazz musicians was one stream, that Blagojević implemented by creating different small grants opportunities, while value of inclusion and tolerance was continuously present through program dedicated to Roma heritage and music that has many elements of jazz. In parallel, Blagojević as social and cultural influencer, publicly acts when values of tolerance are jeopardized by the local authorities in city of Niš. Most recently, in the case of naming street after famous Roma artist and singer, Šaban Bajramović, calling it “racist” (big boulevard was named after Bajramović, and public authorities wanted to change that, and to name street after him that is located in the Roma part of town).

His “activist” profile and integrity norms Nisville practice are also seen in the cooperation with Kosovo based artists. In 2022, the theatre stream of the programme included the play “Balkan Bordello”, produced by artists from Kosovo, as well as Serbian and American theatre organisations. What in the capital such as Belgrade might be allowed usually is not tolerated in provinces where more rigid local governments want to prevent any cooperation with Kosovo artists and with cultural organizations registered within Kosovo legal system. However, Blagojević and his team, did not self censored their programme, and Kosovo artists were welcomed in Niš.

The leadership practiced by the founder and general manager Blagojević, could be defined as values based leadership. Strongly embedded in the regional approach, and including diverse group of artists and cultural operators, Blagojević transformed the perceptions about city as south Serbian province. His engagement in promoting regional cooperation has been recognized, and in 2020 he received a prize from the city of Tirana, capital of Albania, for supporting cultural dialogue and for promoting values of interculturalism. On symbolic level, this reward and recognition is relevant and

Ethical dimension of leadership is embedded within transformational leadership (Brown et al. 2005), while some authors claim that ethics is central to authentic leadership. What we saw, is that the values of integrity are present in the style practiced by Blagojević, and they are present in different layers of the programme but also within public stances towards public authorities, who are deciding about financial and infrastructural support to the festival. His creativity and entrepreneurial talent to create something new and innovative that became a brand, was over years supported by strong sense and recognition of the need for regional exchanges through art and culture.

Creative Mentorship – shared leadership inspiring changes

In 2011, students from the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policy and Management at the University of Arts were invited by Helene Larsson, who was the cultural attaché of the Swedish Embassy in Belgrade at that time, to participate in the 'Creative Society' project. This project group, which also included other young cultural professionals from Serbia, organized numerous talks that facilitated exchanges between Swedish and Serbian cultural professionals. Through these talks, participants had the opportunity to learn about and exchange ideas on mentoring and personal development, which emerged as one of the most significant impacts of the project.

In 2013, the group got the assistance of the Swedish Embassy to explore further forms and modalities of mentorship programme. Inspired with different programmes three members of the group, Dragana Jevtic, Visnja Kisic, and Marko Radenkovic, decided to create an NGO Creative Mentorship and to initiate this programme in Serbia. Most of the other members of the group stayed connected with Creative Mentorship, serving on the Board of CM (Marko Radenkovic, Relja Dereta, Slavica Sandic) or as consultants and mentors (Dragana Tomic Pilipovic, etc.). The program is conceptualised to match 25 mentees with 25 mentors during 18-month cycle. In this period, besides their personal encounters,

they both go through different types of educational programs designed to help the personal and professional development of the participants, who are described as the "future leaders in the field of culture" (Stefanovic 2018: 320).

In more than ten years of the programme development, six core mentoring programmes have been realised and one regional leadership mentoring programme implemented. Among the mentees, there were artists, cultural managers, researchers, lecturers, freelancers, and entrepreneurs from creative sector (like fashion brand Skrabac). Among the mentors, there was a wide group of artists, cultural managers, publishers, curators, researchers and professors from the whole region.

The platform is financed via fundraising. The management does not perceive their model as a typical entrepreneurship model because the profit was never a motive for starting the initiative. However, the investment in talent and self-development was. Creative Mentorship by encouraging entrepreneurship skills via training, creates knowledge and instruments that every mentee can use and transform into their own future entrepreneurship model. The know-how of the platform is valuable since the management of initiative has developed a mentorship toolbox (in English and Serbian) spreading the activity within the region (sometimes even outside of the region, i.e. in Kosice Slovakia, or later in Bilbao and Tallinn).

The key leaders of Creative Mentorship are graduates of cultural management programmes of the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policy and Management (Dragana Jevtić and Višnja Kisić) and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (Tatjana Nikolić). Thus, the organisational structure and its way of operating were developed "by the book": discussions of both team and Board about the values, mission, vision, and strategies, regular evaluation, examining aims and positioning concrete developmental targets. The former director of the British Council was the Board chair and an important number of foreign cultural professional were in the Advisory Board (50%). This has shown willingness of the CM team to learn and apply highest managerial standards, not usually demanded in cultural practices of Western Balkans (systemic evaluation of activities; impact evaluation; regular cycles of strategic planning; reporting and communicating; etc.).

Over years, initiative went through different stages introducing new features, widening the program to link master students of cultural management with cultural professionals, and this new ambitions influenced the development of "mentorship culture" in Serbia. Growth of the initiative demanded important changes in the structure of the Board and creation of the Honorary Board. It culminated in 2021 when Larisa Halilovic became the president of the Advisory Board. In 2022, the Honorary Board got two co-chairs in accordance with CM values of participative work and shared leadership (Dalborg & Lofgren 2016: 104), finding proposals and solutions through discussions. Although very often teaching and training about different formats of leadership, throughout the working process, the team is practicing shared leadership and for the most of cultural public, whole team, not individuals, is perceived to be behind the CM platform.

Slowly, the programme refocused from mentoring to leadership and the new programme for Creative Leaders was created for professionals from the fields of culture, art and creative industries, who live and work in the Western Balkans. Through this programme, trainees receive individual support from a mentor 1-on-1 for a period of one year, but, what is more important, the possibility of networking with professionals from the field of culture, art and creative industries from the entire region of the Western Balkans. Specific Creative Leaders Exchange Grants is supporting networking and direct collaboration between cultural leaders in Western Balkans and the EU through study and research visits.

Regionalisation and internationalisation brought new challenges. The sixth cycle was the first regional cycle, with many successes and some difficulties due to the distance between mentors and mentees or specific situations in life of several mentees. Educational program is successfully done online while the mid-term gathering was organised in person. Through Erasmus+ project: *Reinventing Mentorship in Arts Management* knowledge and passion for mentorship was shared, the team participated in writing collection of articles on mentorship, policy papers, developing a mobile app, etc. The scope of work was broadened significantly (5 mentoring programs for other organizations since the beginning of this

cycle). The organisation got new Erasmus+ project: *Music for Change* (connecting the academic environment with the market through a mentoring program).

The Creative Mentorship team, along with the chairs and members of the Advisory Board, including Honorary Board members, practice shared leadership that is also values-based, with an ethical dimension that permeates their work, particularly in the sharing of knowledge and experiences. An illustrative example is the online event "Creative Mentorship Talks - Inspiring Story," featuring a conversation between CM Advisory Board members Larisa Halilović (Sarajevo), an international expert in development and a TEDx speaker, and Helene Larsson Pousette, Counselor for Cultural Affairs of the Embassy of Sweden in Washington, DC (Advisory Board member), moderated by Tamara Kojić, a producer and change initiator and also a member of the Creative Mentorship AB team. Through sharing their personal stories about mentorship experiences and offering advice to art and culture professionals, they contextualize the importance of regional, European, and even global connectivity, endorsing in practice the still rare opportunities for collaborative practices.

Simultaneously, the leadership team of the Mentorship embodies a transformational leadership approach, demonstrating the ability to motivate not only themselves to actively shape the organization's future but also, through the specificity of their program, to inspire regional cultural leaders (and beyond) to foster a spirit of innovation and development within their organizations. This includes fostering enthusiasm for new initiatives and entrepreneurial endeavours.

Conclusions

Arts and socio-cultural entrepreneurship represent a promising field of research that involves various disciplines. The contemporary political and social context motivates cultural and artistic operators to address social and political issues in the Western Balkans region. Dynamics in the internal political sphere, geopolitics, and unresolved bilateral issues color the setting in which cultural organizations operate, which is why we looked at the issues from the regional perspective.

The interest from audiences, as well as from different stakeholders, including the donor community and external players like the European Union, USA, and UK, who seek to promote cooperation and exchange, is present and substantial. As expected, art and culture are among the first fields worth investing in if the goals are related to fostering cooperation and communication among groups with differing political views.

Given that the majority of the Western Balkans six belong to the same cultural heritage stemming from Yugoslavia, it's inevitable to share similar cultural habits and tastes. Mainstream media in the region for months discussed the case of Serbian popular singer Aleksandra Prijović, who enjoys widespread popularity across the region and who is unofficially biggest regional star, with five sold out concerts in biggest concert venue in Zagreb, Arena. Moreover, the most respected cultural events often have a regional character. Many festivals promote reconciliation and intercultural dialogue, such as the Krokodil festival in literature, the At the Half of the Road festival in Užice, and the Odakle Zovem festival of short stories in Podgorica. In the performing arts field, there's the Festival Without Translation in Užice, Theatre on the Crossroads in Niš, and numerous dance programs and festivals like the Nomad Dance Academy.

Entrepreneurialism in the cultural sector is often acknowledged as developing new initiatives, forms, and methods of acting without taking into account its possible economic outcomes. In many cases, new entrepreneurial initiatives demand more effort in fundraising and additional workload for modest teams, such as the theatre festival within Nisville or the regional mentorship programme for Creative Mentorship. For the independent cultural sector, being entrepreneurial means being innovative and working in the public interest while having freedom to create activities and programs without (self) censorship. This is why entrepreneurialism is more linked to regional and European perspectives, as additional fundraising is easier to secure on the regional and European levels than on the national level, as the examples of Creative Mentorship and Heartefact indicate.

Research has confirmed that most entrepreneurs in arts and culture feel a responsibility towards the sociocultural context and are convinced that their work creates public value. This might be one of the reasons why they rarely present themselves as entrepreneurs, preferring to be seen as those who work in the public interest or change makers, or cultural influencers. Even in their processes of collaboration, partnership, or selecting participants for their programs, values are the key factors in decision-making. In Creative Mentorship, both mentors and mentees are selected based on their values and interest in contributing to societal changes; their managerial skills and capacities are only valued if accompanied by a passion for contributing to cultural or social changes. Most programs and projects address key common problems of the Western Balkans, demonstrating the extent to which cultural entrepreneurs operate with broader horizons, even when situated in a local community. Societal problems often form the basis for art projects or other multidimensional programs, as seen with Heartefact.

Although most new entrepreneurial initiatives in the Western Balkans start with the needs and resources of a local context, they quickly see their development perspectives on a regional, Western Balkan, or larger Southeast Europe level if they become successful. This was the case for all three organizations we studied, as well as for most of the organizations we mapped during the selection process (festivals and organizations mentioned above). Regional expansion is seen as a step forward in organizational development, especially important as it is often based on the values of solidarity (professional) or on the values of enabling cultural transfers and reconciliation through culture among politically divided

regions. All three organizations offer their capacities to promote other regional organizations, artists, and cultural professionals, developing collaborative projects and different forms of exchange

It is no surprise that evidence suggests transformational leadership may be more effective in government (public) organizations compared to industrial organizations (Mumford and Van Doorn, 2001). Based on our research, we could agree and state that for independent socio-cultural and non-government organizations, transformational leadership works better than transactional leadership. Depending on the values, which are key reasons for the creation of organizations in the independent sector, it is clear that values-based leadership will dominate, as most of these organizations are created to address gaps in the public cultural realm and fulfil tasks of public interest. All the organizations we researched see their work in promoting regional cooperation and cultural development as their own task, even though governmental public policies sometimes are not favourable and enthusiastic about all kinds of collaboration that exist and might rise.

The research has confirmed the third hypothesis: that cultural leadership primarily resides in values-based leadership styles, ranging from transformational to shared leadership. Most leaders in the NGO sector in Serbia fall into the category commonly referred to as transformational leaders. These leaders do not focus on strategic planning, formal decisions, or formal worker performance evaluations. Instead, they use their capacities to offer inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation to colleagues, partners, audiences, and all stakeholders. Transformational leadership is often linked to the personal charisma of a leader, as seen in the cases of Andrej Nosov and Ivan Blagojevic. Additionally, in the Western Balkans, where the theory of bottom-up cultural policy has been developed (Višnić, 2008), shared, collective leadership is one of the major values and is prevalent in numerous networks (NKSS Belgrade, Kooperativa Zagreb, Balkan Nomad Dance Academy) or service organisations (Stanica – Service for Contemporary Dance, Creative Mentorship).

Although research in the Global North indicates that shared leadership is not feasible in large public cultural organizations and is often problematic in smaller ones that depend on the charisma of a single artist or leader, our research has shown that shared leadership is possible in self-governing structures. These structures nurture an organizational culture where innovation and entrepreneurial ideas can come from every employee, including volunteers. The autonomy that the organization seeks for itself, often perceived through diverse fundraising efforts, extends to its employees. This autonomy advocates for zero hierarchy, rotating leadership (not linked to predetermined time periods but to the personal needs of team members, with the understanding that another team member will step in when necessary), spontaneous leadership, and more. In such cases, shared leadership occurs within both top and middle management. NGOs in the Balkans rarely have employees performing routine operational tasks (such as cleaning or ticket sales), as these tasks are usually outsourced. On the other hand, values based leadership dominates in the socio-cultural entrepreneurial initiatives, that have missions embedded in the regional context that need cooperation and exchange, despite the rise of nationalistic political discourses. As someone noted on the social media after the Eurovision 2024 song contest: “The war in the region is finally over, Serbs gave 12 points to Croatia”. We still wait to see the same happening between Serbia and Albania.

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ⁱ Western Balkans is geopolitical term, that have been used in media discourse for many years, while as political construct it became formalized in European Union Summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. It is a group of countries that were/are targeted by the European Union enlargement policy, and that are geographically connected. This group is originally constituted by Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. During the Thessaloniki Summit, the EU pledged its commitment to the region’s integration, and since then only one country, Croatia, has successfully joined the EU. Among the six remaining countries – also referred as the Western Balkan 6 (WB6) – four are candidate countries for accession (Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia) and two (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) are potential candidates <https://clustercollaboration.eu/international-cooperation/western-balkans> Except Albania, all were part of Yugoslavia and have history of conflict and disolution of their country. In Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, language is the same with minor dialect variations.

ⁱⁱ www.heartefact.org

ⁱⁱⁱ www.nishville.com

^{iv} www.kreativnomentorstvo.com

^v The only joint history project can be found at <https://www.jointhistory.net/index-eng.html>

^{vi} 90ties are the period of conflicts and wars in the ex Yugoslavia.