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Civil society actors and practices for reshaping international cultural relations

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Abstract

This article examines the expanding role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the 'fourth
sector' in reshaping international cultural relations over the past fifteen years. The authors
analyse bottom-up approaches that challenge traditional state-led cultural diplomacy,
focusing on how CSOs operate beyond 'methodological nationalism' while resisting both
globalisation pressures and exclusive national identity promotion. Drawing on examples from
the Balkans and other regions—including Nomad Dance Academy, Krokodil literary festival,
and Red/Crvena feminist organisation—the study demonstrates how civil society employs
innovative strategies such as festivals, art residencies, knowledge transfer, and regional
networking. These organisations prioritise the ethics of solidarity and care, often working to
decolonise and de-Europeanise cultural relations. The research reveals that CSOs function
as 'counterpublic' spaces, creating platforms for dissent and social change while fostering
equitable cultural exchanges. Unlike traditional diplomatic approaches, civil society initiatives
emphasise fairness, mutual enrichment of peripheries, and bringing marginalised voices to
global attention, offering alternative frameworks for international cultural cooperation based
on responsibility and solidarity.

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Introduction

The contribution of civil society actors and the so-called 'fourth sector' to the dynamics and extent of international cultural collaboration, has risen significantly in the last fifteen years.[1] In the context of reshaping international relations, and widening the scope of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations, this chapter explores the role of civil society and 'bottom-up' policies, practices and initiatives in this landscape. This will include a conceptual overview and systematisation of civil society endeavours in the cultural field, contributing to the development of the concept of 'pluriverse' in international relations (Reiter 2018), along with the demand for more equity and fairness (Magkou et al., 2023). In particular, the focus of our analysis and examples of programs and projects is indicative of bottom-up approaches in reshaping and managing cultural relations and cultural diplomacy.

Civil society actors in international cultural relations

The growing significance of *civil society* has become evident in various fields of policymaking as well as in the academia and cultural policy research (Keane 1998), and now on the agenda of international organisations. International cultural relations and cultural diplomacy have been widened both as discourse and policy in recent years, though arguably still conceptually ambivalent and blurred (Gienow-Hecht & Donfried 2010; Durrer & Henze, 2020, etc.). The increase in the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) and especially non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must be set in the context of broader processes of globalisation, whereby they are focussed on problems that were

once considered exclusively the domain of governments (lately, human rights and sustainable development). However, the current place of CSOs in relation to the State at the national and international level, as well as international relations in general, still expresses a systemic ambiguity (Anheier 2013; Isar & Triandafyllidou 2021). In addition, the uncertain and unpredictable environment for CSOs and the increased diversity of their organisational structures present another challenge — in providing conceptual and empirical underpinnings for policymaking and practice (Isar 2022: 234). Globalisation and the transnationality of civil society emerge as one of the main drivers of the internationalisation process of CSOs, since citizens begin to establish relationships across borders and increasingly have a greater voice in government policies (Bouget and Prouteau 2002).

In international cultural relations, CSOs and the so-called 'fourth sector' appear as new actors in the field, whether as networks, groupings, activist movements, artistic collectives, (in)formal international art residencies, service organisations, co-working spaces, etc. (Klaić 2007). All of them, even if non-registered in official terms (or 'unincorporated'), formed 'a novel realm of action in the cultural sphere that is located in yet another non-commercial and non-governmental realm' (Böse et al. 2006: 131). Independent art organisations, networks and civil society movements, often defined as a 'bottom-up' of policymakers, act beyond 'methodological nationalism' (Beck & Grande 2010;), resisting both pressures the of globalisation and corporate interests as well as the exclusive promotion of national identities. However, there is still a lack of theory and analysis concerning the agency and efforts of civil society actors for conceptualising and practising international cultural relations and cultural diplomacy.

The so-called '(re)discovery' of civil society, from the end of the 1980s, with its initial focus on NGOs, has brought new forms and functions for bringing about social change and the development of a more democratic society (Hirsch 2003: 8). Widely regarded as organisations

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with a concerted vision of global citizenship, CSOs have gained universal currency in today's world. After the ending of the bipolar world in 1989, a new concept of 'a new world order' started to be used, without reaching a clear definition about 'the politics or ethics around which the world can genuinely unite' (Vickery 2017: 42). The concept 'cultural pluralism' was effectively replaced by 'multiculturalism' (Kymlicka 1995) with only a partial hope for a world heading toward more tolerant, equal and peaceful society, of *transculturality* (negotiating the relations between majority and minority populations with a range of legal and constitutional measures). Such complex processes contributed to the redefining of the dominant notion of civil society, particularly in the policymaking of the new European democracies (the Council of Europe introduced systemic evaluation for national cultural policies in the mid-1980s).

In the 1990s, the reconceptualisation of civil society was supported by international research and funded projects, focusing on countries where democratic systems had yet to emerge. As 'societies in transition', the countries undergoing major structural and institutional reform (Dragićević Šešić 2013; O'Donnell et al. 1986), but they also saw economic and social crises and it was cultural institutions who would testify to the need for the social justice that had not yet been established or grounded on a stable basis. In many such countries, civil society 'succeeded in defining the social relations of culture without the categories of race and religion' (Vickery 2017: 42), especially in those where the process of transition started together with a rise of ethnic conflicts (Southeast Europe, Caucasus, Central Asia, and Baltic countries). In the field of culture, CSOs took on roles that an often rigid and sclerotic cultural-institutional system (existing official public culture) could not deliver, and this was the case in other domains of public interest, research, education, ecology, and media. The civil society discourse of the 1990s prevailed in its mission to offer a specific, politically correct 'double talk' to represent 'commitment to democracy' of a society where a critical debate, as well political deliberation and social communication, existed

only by default — the reality was populism, authoritarianism, a 'blurred future' (Ada 2023).

These processes coincided with new global cultural policies – the UNESCO World Decade for Cultural Development 1988-1997 was pivotal; preparation processes were initiated for several new declarations and conventions, by UNESCO and the Council of Europe (including the evaluation of cultural policies at regional, city and neighbourhood levels, as well as national). These efforts were part of many other international policies aiming to raise the capacity of civil society in transitional countries (of Europe and in developing countries), principally through aid programmes of foreign states agencies as well as various UNESCO programmes. Also, the European Union (EU) during this time grounded its strategic aid orientation on intercultural dialogue and cooperation, as well as a bottom-up approach to cultural relations involving civil society and local cultural actors. Many such policy innovations claimed to be implemented through a dialogue with civil society yet mostly led from above; nonetheless, this era established norms of respect for cultural rights, and principles of equality, inclusion and participation in policymaking processes.

As Vickery claims, in discussing Žižek and Agamben, 'while the practice of rights and equalities serve to protect and promote the individual member of each community, the 'multi' in multiculturalism is unlimited; the parameters of diversity are infinite; the openness of the contemporary critical mind to the new global expanse of humanity is indefinable. Agency is hybrid, and its categorisation is violence to the specificity and particularity of potential cooperation'. (Vickery 2017: 42)

There are many more historical moments that speak of the strengthening of CSOs in culture and cultural policy. More public funds for cultural projects were distributed on the base of public 'calls'; the role and position of arts and art/cultural management in higher education had increased (multiplying the number of its programmes on all three levels of higher education); there was a significant rise in

'entrepreneurialism' (Dragićević Šešić 2020) in the cultural sector, with demands for additional programmes in continuous professional development and the introduction of entrepreneurialism in higher art education. This was all particularly evident in intersectoral and transdisciplinary projects and programmes that enabled independent cultural sector to link with businesses (tourism, agriculture, transport, IT industry, etc.) — along with projects and programmes of civil society organisations in other domains such as human rights, feminist movements, green agenda promotors, groups promoting social justice and social inclusion, and so forth.

Partnerships and other practices of CSOs in 'bottom-up' international cultural relations

The beginning of the 21st century appears as an era of fear, hatred, and frozen and vivid conflicts, of asylum seekers and refuges, and also an era of cultural transfers and utopian beliefs in progress and progressive international relations. The common horizons of international cultural relations began with the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations (1922) and the establishemen of UNESCO (1946), yet all currently stimulating disillusionment about the capacities of United Nations and its agencies to deliver a sustainable peace. Repressive neocolonisation and a deprivation of resources (extractivism) across the world have left populations of people without basic human rights and outside of the orbit of attention of intergovernmental organisations.

The contribution of civil society is more than complementary to public policies. In many countries, the initiatives, ideas, and scope of action — despite a chronic lack of financial and infrastructural resources — are offering more innovation and effectiveness in international cultural exchanges, especially in times of global uncertainty and mistrust (where cultures of fear and humiliation are dominating international geopolitics: Moisi 2010). Civil society initiatives are often parallell with the 'decolonising' programmes of cultural professionals employed in public museums, archives, libraries, theatres,

cultural centres (such as the House of World Cultures in Berlin and Paris). These programmes are trying to usher in new ideas from the 'peripheries' to the centre, to 'de-Europeanise' world culture and to 'decolonise' it in the sense of bringing justice and a new ethics into the discourse of international cultural relations. Many universities in the academic world have changed their approach to curricula in this respect, moving beyond the 'entrepreneurial' priorities of the economy, toward an ethically-responsible professional mission in all three of the established 'sectors' of modern economy (Gaio et al. 2023).

Across the world and especially in developing countries, CSOs in culture often use strategies of internationalisation, networking, knowledge transfer, and festivalisation (among others) so as to succeed in enhancing their own capacity for affecting change. The 'international festival' is a common and effective cultural form used to enhance interconnections with the world concurrently with a domestic context, to enrich their own neighbourhood of culture through an internationalisation strategy. Concurrently, the same festival could be used for knowledge transfer and the mutual empowerment of cultural professionals. It is even more important in countries where formal education is not existent or accessible, particularly at professional levels. The multiple roles of festivals can be so intertwined — the representation of artistic achievements and its evaluation, intercultural dialogue, audience development, community links, development of non-professional capabilities through community participative projects, entrepreneurial and managerial education, entertainment, intersectoral project development, and so on.

This is how festivals (and also international art residencies, events and gatherings of different sorts) often start as 'showcase' platforms and spaces for learning through experience and exchange, and after a few years often widen their scope by, for example, organising summer schools, art laboratories (short term learning programmes), with some succeeding to create permanent educational institutions.

And, civil society often finds itself (be default or by political necessity) working as a 'counterpublic' realm: artists and cultural operators are effective at developing cultures of dissent, becoming 'pressure tools' through connecting themselves with sociopolitical civil society movements with a critical approach to systems of power and domination.

A CSO's innovation and readiness for different forms of experimentation, should be framed in terms of several common factors. First, civil organisations are weak in terms of their capacity to survive over a long period of time on the basis of the same cultural activities. All too often they are obliged to ask for funds every year from a limited number of funding organisations, and so have to continually innovate projects and programmes. They also have to incorporate activities through which infrastructural and some operational costs can be covered (rare are funders that give direct funds for such). Secondly, mobility grants (supported very much since 2005 Convention) enable CSOs to use international gatherings to meet colleagues of similar aesthetic and sociopolitical interests, using such occasions to develop programmes and projects of common interest and within a wider, mostly regional, developmental logic (ambitious international projects based on ethics of solidarity and care, have been developed in the last ten years). Thirdly, the lack of public cultural policy in most developing countries heightens a sense of responsibility among cultural professionals, for innovating and supporting cultural actions that enhance life both in their sector and in their community. Civil society projects emerging in 'development' contexts are shaped in unique conditions and to some degree suffer because of their territorial embeddedness and their 'grassroots' origin (often as a self-organised rhizomatic institution, which benefits from little support). Lastly, another factor that distinguishes CSOs from an established public culrural sector is their orientation toward digital space — allowing a necessary flexibility and which is financially less demanding.

Civil society international collaboration is often focused on enhancement of broken regional ties (Caucasus, Middle East, Balkans...). This can be animated by several rationales: economic, social, cultural, experiential. It may seem paradoxical, but this role is validated by the fact that in such conflict situations governments invariably deepen, not ameliorate, the conditions of conflict (rather than in using the skills-base of civil society in negotiating and mediation, or, with public cultural institutions and cooperation with institutions of the 'enemy country'). Thus, civil society gains a strong rationale (and ethical responsibility, if not duty) in enhancing regional relations through common heritage, a common past, or an imagined common future. The role of cultural memory in this can be significant, reviving older or existing points of connection or creating new ones. For many civil society organisations, a 'regional perspective' was a rationale in their creation, such as in the Balkans' Centre for Cultural Decontamination, Heartefact, Krokodil (all in Belgrade), the literary festival, 'At the half of the road', in Užice, Serbia; and, Carver in Podgorica; Red / Crvena in Sarajevo, and others. Many NGOs created regional networks and this is at the heart of their activities, often using the media of the festival (one of the rare platforms that private sponsors are more likely to endorse; festivals are offer visibility).

Nomad Dance Academy (est. 2005) is an example of the power of regional networks. This connects contemporary dance CSOs from Slovenia to North Macedonia and Bulgaria which, through their projects like '(Non)aligned Movements', boost the creative and collaborative potentials of contemporary dancers. The organisation is active in the fields of dance art education, creation, production, promotion, advocacy, and cultural policies for dance. Each network member is a service organisation or non-profit co-working space, while the network is moving beyond projects, joining forces in solidarity towards policy actions. Thus, the Nomad Dance Academy's activists are fighting for better conditions for contemporary dance development and better working conditions for artists. Starting from the need to reinforce regional ties and share resources that are extremely scarce, they went far beyond, crossing the ocean and connecting with North and South America. Some of their members

refuse to be registered and 'to play' as the system is currently orchestrating — and so, in this respect, these might be considered more as belonging to the fourth sector (Boese et al., Ibid.).

Another example is the Carver bookshop (named after American writer Raymond Carver, who worked beyond local cultural divisions) in Podgorica (Montenegro). With its projects, programmes, and festivals, Carver was connecting writers who are writing in mutually comprehensive languages (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian); today, it is opening wider, worldwide perspectives. One of their major activities concerns aa literary festival and competition for short stories, 'Odakle zovem' ('where I am calling from').

Similar also, is the International literary festival 'At the half of the road' (est. 2006) organised by pupils of the Gymnasium (high school) in Užice (Serbia). Led by their professor, and implemented in different city institutions (from the Gymnasium itself to the local library), it can be an example of the activities of a fourth sector enterprise developed by the younger of engaged citizens.

Within the same range of literary communication, Krokodil (est. 2009) is an annual literary international festival dedicated to the promotion of dialogue, reconciliation, and reconstruction of broken links in the region of the Western Balkans. It has grown over time, and orienting itself toward the more critical cultural and sociopolitical actual topics. In its 14 editions, Krokodil presented through different formats (readings, interviews, panel discussions, workshops, different audiovisual content) hundreds of distinguished writers, artists and intellectuals. Up to 2023 the festival gathered 2500 participants and 115 programmes with 55,000 visitors. Every year, the festival has its own theme from the 'Krokodil's 10th' (2018), 're-make/re-model' (2020), 'borders vs. frontiers' (2021), 'the year of magical thinking' (2022), 'spaces of freedom' (2023), etc. The festival also has activities throughout the year – residency programme, educational workshops and trainings, and solidarity manifestations such as 'Marking the International Women's Day With Our Friends from Gaza'. Association Krokodil created a

programme 'Krokodil on the road' to actively participate or co-organise some of the most important literary and other events in Europe and Middle East. Thus, the event 'The Coast is Queer' in February 2021 in Bristol, showcased queer writers from the post-Yugoslav region and launched a new collaboration between Krokodil, New Writing South, and the University of Brighton. The project 'Neighbours' (with Qendra multimedia from Priština, Kosovo) became a platform for literary and cultural communication between Kosovo and Serbia.

Crvena (Red) association for culture and arts is a feminist leftist organisation from Sarajevo (est. 2010), celebrating its birthday every 8th of March. They 'englobe' artistic, research, educational, and political practices, wanting to contribute to progressive social change. The association is focused on the development of self-governing, critical and imaginative horizons, organisational links (focusing on the position of women), governance on social and natural resources, political decision-making, everyday life, art and creativity. They exist thanks to the international organisations (Olof Palme Center, Kvinna till Kvinna, Mediterranean Women's Fund, Heart and Hand fund, i-platform, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, European Commission's programmes, Fund for Open Society, European Fund for Democracy) — and also members, sympathisers, and friends. Their research and other activities are of a regional character; the last research 'Govern together. Contributions to the research of (dis)continuity of self-governance' (2023) was published by NGOs from three countries: Red from Sarajevo, Institute for Political Ecology from Zagreb, and the Platform for Commons from Belgrade. The association is a member of numerous European movements and projects, and it closely works with the trade unions, as well as the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This diversity of perspectives, trans-sectoral links going beyond the region and Europe, interests in memory research and the reactualisation of neglected historie (especially of women), are now thankfully typical of civic organisations — many now actively refusing to work with values imposed by either nationalism or globalisation.

A typology of civil society orrganisations and their contributions to bottom-up international cultural relations will be an ongoing project. Their forms and formats are fluid, hybrid, and permanently changing according to opportunities in their own context, as well as internationally. Besides that, numerous such organisations in totalitarian countries choose (or are compelled) to be registered as private commercial entities (an issue in the context of European funding schemes that demand international CSO status). Taking into account that many creative enterprises in the 'cultural and creative industries' choose to act beyond their own commercial interests, their values and missions are closer to civil society sector than to any typically 'private' ones.

Discussion and conclusion

In assessing civil society organisations in terms of implications for 'bottom-up' cultural policies, numerous activities and activism pertaining to international relations could be cited. They have obviously contributed to the shaping of the current contemporary complex landscape of international cultural cooperation. Many if not most new agents of citizen diplomacy are motivated by an ethics of solidarity and care, often directly invested in improving sociopolitical and cultural conditions for artistic work (production and dissemination) — or the broader wellbeing and the life of the communities they are serving. These two latter aims are often intertwined, as with the case of *Festival sur le Niger*: it has contributed to its city and region (a force for peaceful and sustainable development through the festival event itself) and plays a central role in facilitating professionalism in cultural production and cultural management — through entrepreneurial activities in even management as well as technical skills in sound, lighting, and stage design. It generates value for the whole region of Western Africa and beyond.

The complex 'micropolitics' of international cultural relations is probably slipping away from any attempt at clear taxonomies, as most of the organisations are, at the same time, performing multiple roles in networks and services, in wider activist movements, and as 'flywheels' of local

development. The strategy of internationalisation that each of them intuitively or deliberately had introduced, has enabled not only intercultural dialogue and understanding, but important knowledge transfer that usually results in high-quality artistic, cultural, and knowledge production. All these three kinds of production are based on research, sometimes interconnected with contemporary social issues and problems (community embedded research within the festival `At the Half of the Road`), or different forms of collaborative artistic research developed during the residencies. Or historical concerns (examples of which would include, Crvena, which explores antifascist women movement in Yugoslavia during WWII, as the Nomad Dance Academy explore the Non-aligned Movement).

Thus, the international activities of CSOs, in their innovative and diverse character, are moving beyond the representation of national cultures abroad (as traditional ICR), offering through their active and engaged forms of solidarity, different possibilities of cultural transfer (i.e. based on fairness and equity). Such initiatives, ideas, and activities, despite the lack of public policies and resources, are generating innovative and effective forms of international cultural exchanges. They are flexible for change and rhizomatic development, like the *Festival sur le Niger*, which in the 15 years of its existence evolved 12 new organisations, all active in international relations (Dragićević Šešić & Haidara Maiga, 2022). This phenomenon is even more valuable in times of global crisis (wars, migrations, global warming), where the international order is characterised by uncertainty, mistrust, and insecurity. Such is evident in most of the 'conflict regions', from the Balkans to the Sub-Saharan Africa, where civil society organised festivals are engines for the processes of mediation (by way of example, regional literary festivals: Krokodil, Belgrade; 'Odakle zovem', Podgorica; 'At the Half of the Road', Užice; Festival in the Desert, Timbuktu / Cultural Caravan for Peace in Sahara region, etc.).

Civil society networks and organisations in culture, together with artists and cultural professionals (often employed in the public sector but also those feel a part of the fourth sector), are

therefore championing the bottom-up processes of cultural policy. If public policies are, per se, set of ideas in action, a 'more or less coherent set of values, norms, algorithms, and instruments' (Dupin-Maynard & Négrier 2020: 11), then civil society orrganisations are delivering innovative ideas and original formats, through culture, indeed, often embedded in local traditions (e.g., self-governance in the Western Balkans). These are, however, not parochial but hybridised with global knowledge and methods enhanced by donors coming from the Global North. With CSOs', 'diplomacy' is focussed on processes as much as products — on fair cooperation and accentuating the necessity of decolonisation and the 'de-Europeanisation' of world culture. These bottom-up practices and policies enable the mutual enrichment of peripheries, but also help in bringing the as yet unheard voices from the world's margins to the privileged cultural centres of the Global North. While these processes cannot stop wars or global social injustice, many critical issues (the cultural rights of Kurdish, or Palestinian, population) would be less known or understood.

The 21st century moved the world in its totality toward disillusionment with regard politics and political actions, yet a motion can also be discerned, toward the power of the arts and the intellectual aspirations of culture. Art and cultural organisations, together with civil society movements, are conceptualising a range of actions and activism for a renewed international realm — raising awareness on important international long-term injustices, on gender-based violence and oppression, exclusion, segregation, and even apartheid or aiming to divide society privileging only one social group.

In the international sphere, CSOs in culture are avoiding 'directivity' from any kind of bureaucratic centre, including the powerful international governmental and nongovernmental organisations which, despite their egalitarian discourse, often impose agendas created in the Global North. The values and vision of the future that civil society for culture is bringing through new creative actions and practices are not only identifying the unjust and the cruel, but potential

frameworks (new conceptualisations and reconceptualisations) of an international cultural relations based on responsibility, care and solidarity. Their actions are showing that developmental visions should be closer to people's needs and local horizons, debated and agreed through different means of social practices and a civic imagination (thus, the importance of the fourth sector). Most international festivals, art residencies and collaborative artistic projects, have been designed to develop arts and cultural sectors through knowledge transfer and other forms of solidarity support enhancing production, safeguarding, promotion, and dissemination of arts in their material or digital forms. Thus, civil society organisations and their collaborative projects are much more than platforms for the representation of culture – they are a space for creation, dialogue, education, and exchange on the base of equity, care and solidarity among peoples.

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