

WORK AND COLLABORATION ON THE GROUND

Social innovation and creativity in Romania

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Protest movements against the gold mining project in the Romanian village of Rosia Montana have mobilized tens of thousands of Romanians over the last few months. One of the main players of the grassroots movement was the NGO Alburnus Maior which triggered the 'Save Rosia Montana Campaign', which connects the local opposition in Rosia Montana and activists from all over Romania fighting against plans for Europe's biggest open-cast gold mine.

The protests have provided fertile ground for incredible creativity and shared responsibility. Since cultural gatherings are an exception to the law requiring authorization for large public meetings, cultural acts - from dance, to singing or performing - have been part of the protests both as a means to raise awareness and to give them the required legal grounding.

A concrete example of the social creativity produced during the protests is the mobile projector. A homemade tool - made from a led torch, a magnifying lens and two pipes - the mobile beamer helped protesters project messages on the facades of the buildings on the streets they marched along, inviting people to step out from the comfort zone of their homes and join the protest.

The 'Save Rosia Montana Campaign' is the biggest environmental movement in Romania and as a mobilizing force is a prime example of a socially innovative project that so far has kept the plans for the mine from being realized.

Social creativity from Cluj

The campaign was part of the workshop 'Cluj Caravan' on social creativity that took place in the western Romanian city of Cluj last month. Participants from ten predominantly Eastern European countries reflected on different aspects of culture and sustainability: the resilience of the arts sector and other value-based sectors in a climate of austerity and shifting values; the contribution of culture to a more responsible use of natural resources as well as the need for sustainable alternative models for different social and cultural practices.

The Autonomous Market of Cluj functions on the 'gift economy' principle, which states that goods and services are offered without an explicit agreement or expectations of a reward. The goal is to meet up every month in order to create a money-free space, which is equally free from social division.

Like in other cities, Cluj citizens have also launched an urban gardening project. The Butterfly Garden is part of the Urban Community Garden project which is taking place at the moment on the rooftop of a former industrial factory. However, the Romanian context for the development of urban gardening as a form of civic engagement is different from that in other European countries. Above all else, the project aims at promoting urban gardens as a framework for public involvement in community life. It therefore serves as a catalyst for civic action which is not really acknowledged or encouraged at local or national level.

In contrast, Kitchen Stories is a project with a more culinary approach. As a series of events it brings together the simple act of cooking and eating with strangers, combining this with presentations, talks, film or screenings. The so-called 'Mobile Kitchen' is a self-made minimal construction that has the main utilities of a kitchen and acts as an open cooking space. The kitchen is a modular space that can be installed anywhere in the city, encouraging participants to share the experience and interact with others, while also learning about cooking.

"What we do through our Kitchen Stories events is to transform the simple act of cooking that is omnipresent in our daily lives, mostly as a common routine, into an alibi for bringing people together and building the bridge between life and art", says Corina Bucea who initiated the project. Events are performance actions where the kitchen is used as an open source space for sharing and creating things together with participants.

Interestingly, over the last three years local studies have shown that although the budget of cultural organizations has decreased, their audiences

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Visible City, a project bij AltArt, Cristina Curcan and Roland Vaczi.



Sharing food, stories and ideas at the Mobile Kitchen. Photographer: Dacian Grozaa

have grown. The explanation provided by cultural researchers is that cultural organizations here have managed to adapt to the difficult conditions and optimized their ways of producing, primarily because the cultural sector here is highly collaborative. But how can culture contribute to imagining new models of social interaction and organization?

Another good example of a common initiative is Fabrica de Pensule, located in Cluj where the workshop took place. About four years ago, a group of sixty artists and independent cultural producers initiated the project by renting the space of a former paintbrush factory and transforming it into studios for artists, galleries, and performing arts spaces. It can be seen as a genuine bottom-up initiative born from the demand for cheap industrial, non-central spaces where audiences can be brought together.

It's an impressive example of the opportunities that conversion areas can offer. As a collective project developed by the independent cultural scene in Cluj it became the flagship project of contemporary arts from Romania and it increased the cross-discipline cooperation and the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to the life of the city.

Cultural network of knowledge

Most of the time, initiatives that are relevant for social innovation are local, since they need a very particular context to manifest as well as specific people to be committed to certain values and open to experiments. By mobilizing culture to the benefit of local communities the initiative A Soul for Europe, an organizing partner of the Cluj workshop along with the Balkan Express Network, gives cities a European platform.

Since its Berlin Conference in 2012 the initiative, which comprises cultural managers as well as intellectuals and experts from over 20 countries across Europe, has started to focus on the way in which culture can problematize the questions around a sustainable way of life. This helps to translate the local experience onto a European level: By bringing together people working in different fields of social innovation A Soul for Europe connects different local experiences in a network of knowledge and encourages a joint reflection on what sort of processes may help Europe to reinvent itself and to shape its future. The initiative set up a Cultural Coalition which is a new model for collaboration based on a new approach that connects civil society activists, artists and intellectu-

als, as well as politicians, citizens and policy makers. It is to empower citizens from all sectors of society in building a better Europe.

In general, projects that aim at generating alternatives for different social functions require long-term commitment, as organizers need to work in one and the same community for a longer period of time to create a meaningful relationship with the local people. In addition, artists need to show some open mindedness, willingness to learn and even humility during the process. Aiming to change others without being open to the social environment could not only be seen as arrogant but also to a certain extent as unethical.

Participatory, innovative and open approaches have to be reinvented constantly, and the issues that are relevant for the respective communities have to be identified: They must be able to create ownership and empowerment among the members of a given community. Interventions should be seen as a process of value in and of itself, not simply as a result-oriented management process. If nothing else, failure is part of the experiment and learning.

However, there are also shortcomings to the approach of social innovation: Most of the initiatives do not live beyond their initial phase. Other may, but can fail to reach a critical mass to achieve social relevance. Often those projects don't involve large numbers of people and thus remain an artistically isolated and exotic experiment. Some of the actions may scrutinize and even challenge legality, which is of course their role. But on the other hand they may also generate ethical confrontations that society - or parts of it - is not yet able to face. Ethical and ideological aspects of such projects frequently generate controversies or fuel discursive clashes. And last but not least, socially innovative projects are context sensitive.

In this respect, artists and cultural contributors believe they can play a role in the transformation of our societies. They scrutinize today's realities, call their audiences to question and reflect also upon themselves. In addition, artists imagine new models to cope with today's complex and dysfunctional realities like social and economic injustice, abuse of power or the failure of representative politics. They try to involve a wider public in direct action. Participation and social creativity are culturally coded skills that are crucial for a self-determined society. This explains the desire, especially of the cultural sector, to encourage participation and enhance social innovation.

Creativity is not only manifested in the art projects, but also by means of working together and sharing resources like spaces, equipment, or generating mechanisms to attract donors. In a context where there is little support at policy level, the capacity of cultural organizations to create and reinvent themselves is utterly crucial. □



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