MAECENATA STIFTUNG

Report on the Berlin Conference 2022: Co-creating Europe from the Bottom-up!

Allianz Forum Berlin, 9 November 2022, 09:00-16:00 CET

On Wednesday 9 November, I attended day 2 of the *Berlin Conference 2022: Co-creating Europe from the Bottom-Up!*, entitled *Soul for Europe: Rethinking Europe.* The organisers *were Stiftung Zukunft Berlin* (Future Foundation Berlin), *Wir Sind Europa* (We Are Europe), *A Soul for Europe* and *Cities for Europe*. Incidentally, the conference took place in the *Allianz Forum Berlin*, next to the Brandenburg Gate, on the same day that activists from *Letzte Generation* climbed the gate to protest for climate justice. The 9th November is a significant day for Germany as a whole. It marks the anniversary of the *Kristallnacht*, whereby members of civil society were complicit in the Nazis' destruction of Jewish businesses and synagogues. It is also the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, which came about after protests in the German Democratic Republic and after members of the public gathered at checkpoints in East Berlin, demanding to cross. These events demonstrate how civil society can use its power, for good and for bad, providing a significant backdrop to the conference.

Throughout the day, artists, activists and politicians discussed the importance of culture for civil society and how this can help to consolidate democracy. The opening speech reiterated the discussion of the previous day, whereby participants commented on the role of cities and culture within a European context, and how artists can make meaningful contributions to European identity.

The morning session comprised of three talks, held in English. The first, *East-West*, was especially interesting. The speakers were Rarita Zbranca from the Cluj Cultural Centre, theatre director Haris Pasovic and Yuriy Vulkovsky, Bulgaria's former Deputy Minister of Culture. Zbranca considered culture to be a possible tool for transcending the East-West dichotomy. She further noted that Eastern Europe tends to have lower levels of trust than the West, due to historical events, with her country Romania having the lowest levels of trust in Europe. She stressed that "Trust is culturally created." This means there is the potential for positive change, with initiatives such as city projects offering opportunities to promote collaboration and therefore to "create stronger communities and stronger institutions."

For example, Vulkovsky echoed the belief that arts and culture could be an instrument to facilitate democratic participation. Pasovic was concerned about the rising influence of the far-right on European politics. Whilst he praised the heterogeneity and work of civil society, he emphasised that it is not a replacement for political efforts to create a strong society. Other points of interest were made by Zbranca and Vulkovsky. According to the former, artists and humanitarian workers were among the first responders to aid Ukrainian refugees in February 2022. She called for better support for the arts, in the form of "the right policy frameworks for the freedom of artistic expression to be ensured" and "strong cultural participation" from members of the public. Vulkovsky observed that the panel's discussion had shifted from East-West rhetoric to focus on grassroot politics and how important it is for politicians not to lose sight of key issues.

The second panel of the morning was on the topic of *Youth/ Citizenship*. However, it received criticism from a younger audience member, as none of the panellists were youth representatives. In her view, such events should not focus on activating political enthusiasm within young people, but rather on inviting youth to take part, as many would be interested in doing so. Whilst the panellists discussed issues like the role of culture in effective protest, the event would have benefitted from having younger members of civil society take part. The stance of one speaker, artist Rusudan Petviashvili, was unclear. Although Petviashvili articulated that using cultural tools during protests can give people a common language and a collective sense of problem-solving, she may have implied that homosexual couples raising children was against the rights of the child, a problematic view that was challenged by fellow panellist, artist and theatre-maker Ada Mukhina. She linked the issue to the spread of hate and misinformation perpetuated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I was unsure why Petviashvili had referred to the aforementioned issue and what exactly her meaning was.

During the morning's third session of *Periphery/Cross-border*, Alva Rozenberga, public relations advisor to the President of Latvia, referred to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent human chain that stretched across the Baltics, as citizens called for the end of Communism. Above all, Rozenberga believed it is vital to make "broad statements concrete." Within the context of Ukraine, she suggested that people could employ Ukrainian artists and reduce their energy use.

The afternoon session generally focused on the *Power of Europe Bottom-Up* and was held in German. This took the form of looking at the work of specific civil society organisations, whilst also featuring appearances from speakers such as Volker Hassemer, a former Berlin senator. Hassemer relayed the importance of a communal Europe, and of working to make this vision a reality. In his words, "We are the actors, not the viewers."

Other significant points of discussion during the afternoon session came from Ansgar Klein, founder of the *Bundesnetzwerk für bürgerschaftliches Engagement* (BBE) (The Federal Network for Civic Engagement). Klein commented that Europe is often viewed as a specialist topic, arguing in favour of incorporating a European perspective into all areas and into general discussion. He noted that civil society is impacted by the shrinking space phenomenon, whereby organisations faced increased hurdles from the state that are designed to lessen their scope of work and influence. The creators of the *Europe Bottom-Up* platform also showcased their website. They explained it is a place for organisations to share their work, build networks and promote shared European values. In his virtual speech, Niklas Nienaß, MEP and member of the *Europe Bottom-Up* board, stated that "Politics is everything that affects society." In other words, we need to implement democratic measures on a daily basis, and such actions are constantly a work in progress. Speaker Barbara Gessler, Head of Unit, European Commission DG.EAC D2 Creative Europe, remarked on the importance of partnerships in facilitating civil society's work. Expanding on this comment, she thought that imbedding cultural topics into the hearts of local communities could strengthen civic cohesion. The conference concluded with presentations from four of the twenty-eight projects currently featured on the *Europe Bottom-Up* platform and closing remarks from Markus Dröge, representing the board of *Stiftung Zukunft Berlin*.

He reiterated the need for collaboration within civil society, as well as the importance of both local and European action to combat the influence of anti-democratic actors. In his view, **"Every citizen is a European centre,"** calling for a new deal between art and politics in Europe.

By Lara Brett, Working Student in Communications at the Maecenata Foundation