

CAN CULTURE BE SHUT DOWN?

BOSNIA'S CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND WORLD HERITAGE

Event Summary

On September 20, 2013, the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program hosted a discussion with the members of the civic platform, Culture Shutdown, about the troubled cultural institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The event was moderated by James Snyder, who is a Former Member of the NATO International Staff in Brussels. The members of Culture Shutdown had a broad discussion on the many issues these cultural institutions face. They discussed both root causes as well as possible solutions.

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Jasmin Mujanović, a PhD Candidate in political science at York University in Toronto, focused on the political dimensions to the problems these institutions face and provided some solutions required for there to be progress. The federal government of Bosnia and Herzegovina actively neglects the minority population; barring them from political inclusion and subjecting them to a sub-citizen status. For example, the government has failed to provide new born children with legal documents, has segregated schools based on ethnicity, has done little to improve unemployment which stands at 40%, and has prevented minorities from gaining public office. Unfortunately, the Dayton Agreement does not provide for significant constitutional rights and protections for minorities. Nor does it provide for a comprehensive strategy for the protection of cultural institutions. While all sides would agree the Dayton Agreement should be replaced, Mujanović explained that the only people with a vested interest have no political power. He emphasized that the ethnic structure of the Dayton constitution discriminates against *everyone*, and especially civic-minded individuals. According to Mujanović, there must be political reform in order for the government to provide some legal framework to protect cultural institutions. In conclusion, Mujanović suggested that the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina look to examples established by other multiethnic countries which have created legal systems allowing for peaceful and thriving societies.

Azra Akšamija, Assistant Professor in the MIT program in art, culture, and technology, founded Culture Shutdown to bring awareness to the crisis Bosnian cultural institutions face. After witnessing the closure of the Bosnian National Museum in Sarajevo on October 4, 2012, Akšamija realized several other Bosnian institutions may suffer the same fate. She explained that the historical treasures these institutions carry are of great importance for Bosnian heritage and must be protected by the federal government, ensuring they remain open to the public. For most of the region's history, a multiethnic and multi-religious population had coexisted and prospered. One can see this manifest in the country's architecture, art, and common heritage. However, ethnicity was politicized by Serbian nationalists leading up to the Bosnian War. This led to ethnic cleansing, not just through genocide, but through the destruction of Bosnian cultural institutions as well. Akšamija provided a map to the audience which

indicated the once multiethnic country had developed distinct borders between homogenous ethnic regions. She agreed with Mujanović that the Dayton Agreement did not provide the proper legal protection for minorities or their cultural heritage, which left these institutions extremely vulnerable to financial troubles. Culture Shutdown has brought awareness to this issue by inviting cultural institutions around the world to join in a show of solidarity for Bosnia by placing an “X” with custom made caution tape on one of their important artworks on display. Akšamija was moved that over 300 institutions in 40 countries participated in this show of solidarity. She is hopeful this demonstration of global support will inspire the Bosnian people to take action in gaining legal protection of their heritage.

Susan Pearce, Assistant Professor of sociology at East Carolina University and former Wilson Center Title VIII-supported scholar, pointed out that culture was deliberately targeted during the 1990s war, such as the bombing of the national library in Sarajevo. She explained that the Bosnian leadership and the world need to recognize that the ethnically diverse culture is essential to preserve for there to be a thriving democracy with citizens who know their roots. As a sociologist, Pearce believes that minority culture, not just high culture, needs to be studied and protected. She argued that governments should not interfere with or subdue culture; rather, they should play a role in protecting cultural heritage and the arts. Pearce stated that Culture Shutdown should reach out to sister organizations in the region, especially considering Hungary has experienced its own museum crisis. There is an opportunity for collaborative mobilization, since Turkey and Bulgaria have recently seen street protests that parallel those in Sarajevo this year. She believes that Bosnian activists have the potential to inspire a regional movement in the defense of culture.

James Snyder was also overwhelmed by the amount of participants in the show of solidarity with the Culture Shutdown movement. He agreed with Pearce that Bosnian culture is worth preserving, adding that every culture is a source of world heritage. Snyder drew the comparison between the Bosnian cultural institutions and the Smithsonian Institute, arguing that if the United States government failed to support the Smithsonian, it would be a tragedy to American culture and world heritage. He also stated his concern about the negative global trend towards culture, pointing to the destruction of Muslim artifacts in Mali and the statue of Buddha in Afghanistan as examples of cultural repression. However, he is hopeful about the situation in Bosnia. Snyder pointed to the support Serbian, Macedonian, and Slovenian cultural institutions have shown. The fact that there has been expressed support from former rivals reveals progress can be made despite ethnic divisions.