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Music Festivals for Social Cohesion and Reconciliation: Examining Socio-cultural Contribution of EXIT Festival and OK-FEST

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Music Festivals for Social Cohesion and Reconciliation: Examining Socio-cultural Contribution of EXIT Festival and OK-FEST

Festivals have the potential to encourage people to reconnect by promoting societal ideals, tolerance, and understanding among cultures. Prolonged socio-political unrest in the Balkans, particularly related to the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1990s, spilling till today, influenced the region's global image. The music has always been a significant component of political criticism in this region, while music festivals have served as a communal cohesion and expression platform. Plenty of studies explored how Yugoslav generations were influenced by rock music which carries strong political symbolism and has potential to trigger Yugonostalgia. Some of the well-known music festivals started as a means of political or public protest, such as EXIT festival (2000) in Novi Sad (Serbia), and the OK Fest (2014) in Tjentište (Republic of Srpska). Despite their immense economic successes and capacities to promote social contacts, it is debatable if these events truly improve the reconciliation process and benefit host communities.

Keywords: music festivals, reconciliation, Yugoslavia, socio-cultural impacts, EXIT, OK Fest

Introduction

The Balkans is known as a region where persistent political and social tensions exist, marked with prolonged socio-political unrest and ethnic divides that appeared with the breakup of Yugoslavia, spilling till today, which influenced the region's global perception. This negative image has been slowly changing since the 2000s, acquiring a more positive dimension and building an international appeal as a tourist destination.

The contemporary crises fueled by shifting global geopolitical interests and weaponization also affect the Balkans, identified as a potential hot-spot, bringing back the painful memories and opening issues of unfinished socio-political reconciliation.

This instability is currently epitomized by the 2025 student-led protests in Serbia ignited