

## Not All Journeys Are Made Equal: From Inequities to Possibilities in Balkan Mobility

**Abstract:** This paper examines cultural mobility in the Balkan region through both historical and contemporary lenses, addressing persistent inequities while highlighting emerging possibilities. Drawing from personal experience as a cultural professional from Serbia, the author critically analyzes how regional mobility patterns are shaped by geopolitical frameworks, funding mechanisms, and structural barriers. The paper challenges the artificial construction of the “Western Balkans” category while acknowledging how related funding programs actively reshape collaboration networks and mobility flows within the region. It identifies significant gaps in local support for artistic research and creation, forcing many artists into international mobility out of necessity rather than choice. Despite these challenges, the paper highlights promising practices in Croatia and new initiatives in Serbia that could guide cultural policy throughout the region. The author argues for a shift from viewing mobility as necessity to opportunity, emphasizing the importance of locally-funded artistic research and creation of permanent residency programs beyond capital cities. Such consciously designed intra-regional residencies have the potential to not only redistribute cultural mobility but also repair and renew connections in this post-conflict space.

**Keywords:** cultural mobility, Western Balkans, artistic residencies, cultural policy, regional cooperation

So, where do we begin? What should be the starting point of this paper, if we consider that every text is, in its own way, a journey down the page? Shall we start with Odysseus – the archetypal traveller whose path shaped much of Western literature? And if we do, should we also remember who stays behind, who remains static in the epic’s unfolding? Who waits, grieves, is touched by, loved by, and ultimately left behind by our wandering hero? Even goddesses, in his story, are bound to their islands while he continues onward. Mobility has, from the beginning, been a gendered privilege – an ultimately male prerogative. It would

remain so for much of history: the *grand tours* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were reserved for young aristocratic men, supposedly shaping their worldview through travelling, exploring, inhaling, and (re)interpreting the fields of Europe and its admirable classical ruins.

Is our starting point then a historical baseline from which we might assess how far we have come in the so-called democratization of mobility? Or is this simply anachronistic in the age of mass tourism, cheap flights, and solo female travellers – of which the author is, occasionally, also one? Is travel really no longer a question of privilege, or do the same questions still persist: Who travels and who does not? If so – how, and if not – why? And while we are at it: Who hosts the travellers – and how? Who is touched by their presence and their departure? And how does all this relate to our vantage point in the Balkans – a region frequently marginalized as “peripheral,” yet vibrant with cultural exchange, complexity, and contradictions?

The last thirty years have witnessed not only the transformation of cultural mobility and its growing recognition in cultural policies at the UNESCO or European level, but also the rise of mobility studies and papers addressing the questions outlined above. Many of these works have served as both source and inspiration for this paper. Yet it is important to note that the vast majority were produced in Europe – and even Ukhona Mlandu’s poignant contribution on cultural mobility ethics from an African perspective was commissioned by the Brussels-based platform *On the Move* (Mlandu 2023). Mlandu’s paper was not only a source but also a spark. It challenged academic conventions by grounding the text in personal experience and rejecting impersonal, standardized language – an act of resistance against the epistemic violence (Mlandu 2023).

Then, how do we write about mobility from the perspective of the Balkans? And how do we avoid, in this process, reproducing the “othering” of this region, so masterfully described by Maria Todorova in her *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 2009)? Perhaps by anchoring the text in professional practice and by unapologetically assuming the very personal place the author writes from – a room in the second-largest city in Serbia, which was also a European Capital of Culture in 2022, where she arrived as a refugee from Bosnia some thirty years ago. As a cultural professional, the author works regionally for a France-backed performing arts program and travels regularly throughout Europe as part of her job. The author is also a writer who was awarded a Culture Moves Europe residency in 2024, which allowed her to return and reconnect with her birthplace in Herzegovina – a place the author left in the wake of war.

Since 2010, holders of Serbian passports no longer need visas to enter the Schengen zone, but they still require permits to work there or to stay beyond three months. For Ireland and the UK, visas remain very much necessary – countries the author has never visited, although this paper is written in English, the official language of the conference, which serves as both a foreign tongue and a staple for careers in today's cultural management. A small but telling fact: the author's professional path would not have been possible without fluency in both English and French, in addition to Serbo-Croatian, her mother tongue. Indeed, this level of linguistic versatility is sometimes required from cultural professionals. Finally, this paper has been shaped not only by human-written sources, but also with the help of ChatGPT, used as a trustworthy editor who polished the phrasing and ensured it reads as if written by a native speaker. Normalizing credit to all forms of intelligence relied upon is important in contemporary academic discourse

The scope of this paper is far too limited to fully explore the question of what the Balkans are and what their borders are – Maria Todorova has written extensively about this in her seminal work *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 2009). No matter how we define it, historically and linguistically, this is anything but a homogeneous region. It is rather a complex conglomerate of sub-regions, each with its own profound historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. Furthermore, since Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, we have witnessed the rise of a new sub-regional label: the so-called "Western Balkans" or "WB6." It is a term defined more by what it is not than by what it is: Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania – the six non-EU countries at various stages of the EU accession process.

Along with the new terminology has come a wave of programs like the Western Balkans Fund, *Regional Youth Cooperation Office* (RYCO), and *Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans* (CC4WB), designed to stimulate cultural exchange within this rather artificially constructed sub-region. This flow of funding into "Western Balkans cooperation," is actively (re)shaping the flows and frameworks of collaboration and it is reflected in the mobility patterns of both cultural professionals and artists from the region. Furthermore, the *Perform Europe* survey, although focused exclusively on touring in the performing arts, highlighted a reality of many people living and working in the Balkans already sense – that their primary field of mobility is, in fact, the Balkans region itself. (Perform Europe 2021). This is not to say that many cultural profession-

als from the region do not travel elsewhere (it is worth noting that none of the studies referenced here explore the mobility of Europe-based artists beyond the European continent), but it is largely within the Balkans that these professionals are invited to present their work and are recognised not only as cultural professionals, but also as artists.

There is a clear awareness, anchored in study results, of the disproportionate representation of artists from the Balkans at the European level. Both Culture Moves Europe and Perform Europe have attempted to address this imbalance – one through individual and group mobility grants, the other through geographically balancing its portfolio and deconstructing traditional touring routes within Creative Europe countries. Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans has launched calls specifically targeting artists and cultural professionals from the WB6, supporting their mobility within and beyond the (sub)region through mobility grants. These efforts are timely and necessary, albeit still limited to intra-European mobility. Much remains to be “de-confined,” to borrow the title of the eponymous project exploring cultural relations between the African and European continents – in terms of extra-European mobility. On the other hand, no less remains to be de-confined in terms of intra-national mobility, and Goran Tomka and Višnja Kisić are absolutely right to suggest that: “Going from the centres of Belgrade or Zagreb to their suburbs is a rarer, yet much more needed and emancipatory task than travelling to the centre of Paris, Vienna or Berlin” (Kisić and Tomka in Duxbury and Vidović (2022)).

All the mechanisms cited above are either too recent or still under implementation, and relevant studies have not yet been conducted to demonstrate their impact or suggest improvements. Culture Moves Europe has just completed its three-year cycle and is yet to be confirmed as a permanent European grant scheme, implementation of Perform Europe supported touring projects is currently underway, while CC4WB is closing its call on December 31, 2025, with no clear roadmap for continuation. It should not be forgotten that none of these schemes is run by an organisation rooted in the region. So we must ask – how can we reclaim the issue of regional artists’ mobility and embed it in the long-term work of region-based organisations and in local cultural policies?

Given the topic of this conference, let us focus on mobility related to artistic research and creation, rather than the presentation of finished works. This shift into process places us firmly in the field of artistic residencies – or, as Taru Elfving put it, “the only space-time where the res-

ident is considered solely an artist, rather than balancing the many hats of their myriad jobs and other everyday roles” (Elfving in Duxbury and Vidović (2022)). It also broadens the lens to include not only the artists who travel, but also those who host them, and the communities in which they create. It brings us to a deeper issue: the chronic lack of public funding for open-ended artistic processes – especially in the Western Balkans – which often pushes artists into international mobility not by choice, but by necessity.

In the field the author is professionally active in – contemporary performing arts – this lack is particularly visible. State and city-run repertoire theatres, which dominate the institutional landscape in the performing arts, are rarely accessible to independent companies and they do not have budgets to support artistic research by independent artists. This reinforces the long-standing divide between institutional and independent scenes across the Balkans and pushes artists working in fields without dedicated venues, such as contemporary dance and circus, to seek residencies abroad as the only viable way to fund their work, thus driving often unsustainable and non-inclusive mobility models.

Not everything is bleak, however. There are inspiring practices that could guide cultural policy throughout the region. Croatia offers several examples – the Mediterranean Dance Center in Svetvinčenat and Kuća za pisce (House for Writers) in Pazin, both in Istria, are publicly run facilities hosting international residencies. The independently run House of Klein in Klanjec supports multidisciplinary artistic research, while the Circus Residency Network, led by seven independent Croatian organisations, provides time, space, and mentorship for contemporary circus artists from former Yugoslav countries. These permanent programs have an additional benefit: they allow the development of skilled residency hosts – cultural professionals who not only support artists but also ensure their engagement with local communities. Moreover, these programs are located outside major urban centres, expanding the cultural map and challenging dominant mobility patterns.

And yet, none of these programs provide artistic fees – a major gap in regional residency programs. Artists need more than a roof over their heads and space to work. They need to be paid. A recent project offers hope. In May 2025, a two-year initiative financed through Fond Équipe France will be launch to support the independent performing arts scene in Serbia. Designed in collaboration with Teatroskop but implemented by six Serbian organisations active in dance, circus, and theatre, the

project will fund artistic research residencies in Serbia and abroad. The hope is to show how open-ended creation can be supported locally and to level the playing field for those who face greater barriers to international mobility, for example, artists in caregiving roles or artists with disabilities. Furthermore, in today's context of rising awareness regarding often perceived unsustainability of cultural mobility, going more local, all the while preserving the dedicated time-space for creation, could be a welcome alternative.

For any of this to have long-term impact, the local public funds need to step in and state-run venues must also be open for the independent scene – much like Belgrade's BITEF Theatre does with its “Month of the Independent Scene” program. This would, obviously, require profound reforms of cultural policies that would need to address structural fault lines, systemic discrepancies, and the urban–rural divide, all of which are shaping artistic mobility within and beyond the Balkans. However, despite evident gaps in funding and infrastructure for open-ended creation, there are good – or at least better – practices to draw from, based on solidarity and led by organisations grounded in the region and aware of its realities. Without undermining the value of international mobility, we must ensure that artists from this region can choose when and how to move. By funding local artistic research and creating permanent programs beyond capital cities, mobility can be shifted from necessity to opportunity. When consciously designed, intra-regional residencies can do more than redistribute cultural mobility – they can reconnect, repair, and renew. Especially here, in this post-conflict space where, for many of us, the very first notion of international mobility was that of becoming a refugee.

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