

Serbia: Ethnic Barriers Tumble at Music Festival

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Youngsters from all over former Yugoslavia flock to Novi Sad's high-profile music festival, united by their love of music.

In a whirl of deafening beats and bright flashing lights, Marko from Belgrade is dancing with delight to music played by a Kosovar Albanian DJ. "So that's what Albanians are like," he shouts, grinning broadly. "I never knew the people I was being taught to hate."

Close by, ethnic Albanian Samir from Skopje walks through a sea of tents and fluttering national flags – Croatian, Macedonian, Bosnian, Serbian – as the moonlight dapples the Danube and music pours out of the massive amplifiers placed around ten sound stages at the Petrovaradin fortress in Novi Sad, venue for the EXIT music festival.

Samir and others from all over the former Yugoslavia came here from July 3-6 to enjoy themselves, and they don't feel nervous or edgy about being of different ethnicity. "Nobody really cares if we speak Macedonian or Albanian," he told IWPR.

"Every year we meet some new people and stay in touch afterwards. Everyone is so open and friendly, and that's the main reason I keep coming back."

Before EXIT, Samir would never have risked travelling to Serbia. But all possible languages spoken in the former Yugoslavia can be heard here – and a love of music overrides everything.

Srdjan from Pristina agrees. "We are all citizens of the State of EXIT," he told IWPR with a smile. "The invisible barriers have come down, allowing people from different nations and cities to meet, after so many years of being unreasonably separated."

Marko, Srdjan and Samir are among more than 130,000 people who choose to spend the first week of July in Novi Sad to watch hundreds of musicians – including big-name international acts such as Moloko, The Stereo MCs and Roni Size – rock through the night on the bank of the Danube.

Those who attend say that EXIT is much more than just another rock festival – that it encourages the people of the former Yugoslavia to put their dreadful pasts behind them and learn to communicate with one another again.

First staged by a group including members of the Otpor (Resistance) movement during the last year of Slobodan Milosevic's rule, the name of the festival was chosen to reflect the desire of young people to leave the isolated and paranoid regime behind them, and was initially designed to encourage students to vote in the October 2000 elections.

After the fall of Milosevic, the new government supported another festival in 2001, which attracted a quarter of a million people to nine days of music in the Vojvodina capital.

Visa concessions – allowing EXIT foreign ticket holders to enter Serbia without delay – were negotiated for the 2002 festival. Visitors are now issued with a symbolic orange passport, which features a disco

glitterball representing the world, surrounded by olive branches.

Vladimir Jesic, who organised the festival's open debates, said, "While people come here mostly for music, it's almost impossible to not meet others from different regions. Our main aim is for them to see that a Croat, Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian or Macedonian have similar attitudes to life."

Nikola from Vojvodina turns up for EXIT every year, but sees it as far more important for the region than simply being a money-spinner attracting tourist dollars. "I'm so happy that we have the chance to show the neighbours we were once at war with how similar we all are," he said.

EXIT also serves a purpose in bringing Balkan people face to face with other Europeans, thus breaking down many of the preconceptions of life in the former Yugoslavia.

David, a 23-year-old journalism student from Denmark, was enjoying his first trip to the region. "All I had ever heard about this part of Europe was bad news about Milosevic, war crimes and Djindjic's assassination," he said.

"But a friend of mine, who works here, persuaded me to come to EXIT. There are so many young, nice and open people here who are simply Europeans."

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