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Evolving networks: International sponsors of post-socialist art scenes

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ABSTRACT

In the countries of the former Soviet Bloc, the state had controlled art and culture according to strict ideological criteria – but it also subsidized cultural production. After 1989, the cultural infrastructure largely collapsed together with the state. The vacuum following socialist state subsidy opened up opportunities that were partially seized by international sponsors in the East-Central European region; the Soros Foundation and the ERSTE Stiftung were the two most important of them. Both organizations developed an extensive network of cultural workers across post-socialist Eastern Europe. With their programmes, the two foundations made considerable efforts to make known and brand East and Southeast European art on an international stage. Nevertheless, they, or rather their relevance for the cultural field of post-socialist East-Central Europe, are hardly known outside the region. Based on the insight of central actors in both these networks, this contribution revisits the activities of the two major donors and assesses their impact from today's perspective.

KEYWORDS

Cultural sponsorship; contemporary art; Soros foundation; Soros centers for contemporary art; ERSTE foundation; post-socialist arts and culture

In the countries of the Soviet Bloc, the state-controlled art and culture according to strict ideological criteria for several decades – but it also subsidized cultural production. After 1989, the cultural infrastructure was decentralized and subsidies were reduced or allocated according to a new set of criteria. During the period that German contemporary historians ever more frequently call the “long history of the transformation” (Brückweh, Villinger, and Zöller 2020), two transnationally active funding bodies came to participate in sponsoring cultural production in East-Central and Southeastern Europe (ECSeE): the Soros Foundation and the ERSTE Foundation (ERSTE Stiftung). Both foundations seem to have stepped in to fill the gap after centralized state subsidies were discontinued; the Ministries of Culture showed little to no interest in exploring the cultural legacy of the socialist decades, and no models of public–private partnership yet existed.¹ With their programmes, both made considerable efforts make known and to brand Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European art on an international stage.

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From the mid-1980s on, George (György) Soros established non-profit organizations across post-socialist Eastern Europe with the aim to facilitate the emergence of open societies in place of authoritarian rule.² As part of this agenda, the National Soros Foundation³ and Soros Centers for Contemporary Arts (SCCAs/Soros Centers) opened in the capital cities of over 20 ECSeE countries and former Soviet republics in the early 1990s. While Soros's name is today internationally well-known for his financial speculations, versatile philanthropy, and active influencing of public policy in a number of countries, the investor's involvement in shaping the cultural and social infrastructures of political change in the (ex-)Eastern Bloc remains considerably lesser known. The Austrian Erste Bank and its affiliated ERSTE Foundation started to systematically collect art from East-Central and Southeastern Europe and sponsor cultural initiatives in the region in the early 2000s, just around the time when Soros gradually withdrew from funding culture. Since 2002, the tranzit network has also enjoyed Erste's financial support. Tranzit.org is an independent network of "contemporary art content providers" with local offices in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania. Both networked organizations developed an extensive and increasingly professionalized pool of cultural workers across the post-socialist area, so that their chronological succession was partly buttressed by personal continuities.

Despite their relevance for the cultural fields of post-socialist societies, the existence and accomplishments of these arts initiatives and grant schemes are hardly known outside the region. Besides the various publications that individual Soros Centers produced, a relatively small number of scholarly essays (Hennig 2011; Nagy 2018; Ratiu 2011; Esanu 2021; Hock 2022), art critical pieces (Esanu 2008; Moulton and Lovink 2019) and curatorial projects help reconstruct the history and scope of action of the SCCA network.⁴ There is little scholarly analysis as yet of the ERSTE Foundation's cultural philanthropy (see, however, Hock 2018). In an attempt to revisit the activities of these two major donors, I have summoned the opinions and experience of a small handful of art professionals and grant makers who have been involved either in the work of the Soros (later Open Society) Foundation, the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, or the tranzit network. The general aim has been to explore the points of convergence and significant differences between the two foundations' ways of operation. Given the lesser-known status of the ERSTE Foundation, more attention was going to be allocated to ERSTE's donor profile and activities in the present assessment. These observations were meant to lead to broader ruminations over the intricacies of corporate sponsorship, evolving regional networks, and the neoliberal component in the long history of the post-1989 transformation.

The originally envisioned format of the present contribution was a polyphonic interview, i.e. a series of questions followed, in each turn, with the collected and combined responses of several discussion partners. This intention has been thwarted due to the health conditions of some of the involved parties and by the retrospective withdrawal of some others. In the conversations, aspects of what the contemporary art world calls Institutional Critique abundantly surfaced; they, or the respondent's name, were, however, to be removed from the written record in some cases. Institutional Critique, often expressed through conceptual artworks, seeks to expose the ideologies and power structures underlying the circulation, display, and discussion of art. While the role of institutions, such as museums, galleries, or private collections, has been part of this critical practice, it appears to be more intricate to give voice to concerns over donors or sponsors.

This sort of unease has accompanied the history of philanthropy. Philanthropists making a contribution to society legitimately follow their own personal preferences when making donations; yet, they are free to define social benefit on their own terms (Ostrower 1995, 131). Furthermore, they tend to disregard giving as a means of attaining broad social or political goals (120). In the context of contemporary legal changes permitting the use of wealth in politics, the exercise of private power through philanthropy and the non-profit sector (NGOs) “poses grave threats to the democratic process” (Hall 2013, Ostrower 122), as several analysts remark.

Beside these general remarks about donors’ accountability or critical opinions of their undertakings, we are also facing here two specific circumstances. ERSTE is still the employer of the tranzit-offices’ staff, a condition that leads to a degree of unwillingness or uncomfortableness when it comes to commenting on the foundation’s activities. In the early-mid 2000s (and occasionally earlier), the shared ethos of the SCCAs and the Soros Foundations network received some vocal criticism from within the art world. It is hard to maintain this critical attitude today, in the wake of a series of attacks on Soros and his organizations, propelled by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his government. These factors may explain some respondents’ withdrawal from letting their views published under their name. To avoid a disbalance between disclosed and hidden identities, a decision was made to grant anonymity to most viewpoints expressed and blend them with the text of my own research report.

Launching new infrastructures, building new canons

The Soros (later Open Society) Foundations and the ERSTE Foundation entered the post-socialist cultural landscape in quasi-chronological succession. The terrain, however, has witnessed some significant changes during this transitional period. Erste Bank had a long history of promoting both the visual arts and contemporary culture in a broader sense: it has been a main sponsor both of the Secession, Vienna’s oldest independent exhibition venue dedicated to contemporary art and the Wiener Festwochen, the city’s multidisciplinary art festival. These, however, comfortably fit in the conventional sponsoring framework of corporate philanthropy. A more cohesive programme, with an ever-clearer focus on the post-socialist neighbouring countries, gradually took shape by bringing the first two tranzit offices to life in 2002, founding the Kontakt Collection in 2004, and establishing the ERSTE Stiftung in 2006. Kontakt is the art collection of the Erste Group and ERSTE Foundation, concentrating on art in Central and Southeastern Europe.⁵ Local subsidiary banks have also been invited to contribute to financing and expanding the collection. When Erste Group moved into Erste Campus, its new headquarters, in 2017, the integration of contemporary artworks was part of the building concept. Kathrin Rhomberg, head of the Kontakt Collection in cooperation with French curator Pierre Bal-Blanc, commissioned 12 prominent artists, mainly from Eastern Europe, to contribute to the final look of the campus.⁶

The Slovak, the Czech and the Austrian tranzit offices were set up first, the Hungarian office followed in 2005 and, with a greater interval, the Romanian one in 2012. Recruiting directors for the emerging offices took place through already existing work connections between Austria, especially the Kontakt collection staff, and local professionals. Prospective directors were invited to submit a position paper charting relevant issues in

and for the respective local art scenes. They were then to start an association, for donations were not meant to be transferred to a private individual but, importantly, to a non-profit civic organization. This sounds self-evident today, but in the years leading up to, and launching, the “long transformation,” the conduits of charitable support were not yet fully institutionalized. According to the verbal communication of an acquaintance who had worked at Soros’s Open Society Institute in its early years, similarly recalled how they, back in the early and mid-2000s, still used to simply travel to, say, Kazakhstan or other post-Soviet republics with the money to be donated in their suitcases. An online panel convening recent grantees of the Foundation for Arts Initiatives⁷ likewise revealed how this informal method is still pretty much of the usual way in which philanthropy reaches its addressees in places like Africa or India.

One year after the Soros Foundation was established in 1984 under the auspices of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, it opened the Fine Arts Documentation Center, entrusted with the documentation and international transmission of a sizable pool of contemporary artistic oeuvres. A large proportion of the artists included in its records were key protagonists of the non- or semi-official cultural scene of the 1960s to ’70s whose activities went largely undocumented during state-socialist times. The need to build a database-cum-archive of contemporary art and make it accessible for Western professionals was formulated by Meda Mládek, an art historian of Czech origin and the wife of one of George Soros’s business-world friends (Nóvé 1999, 67).⁸ This sort of documentation work was carried out within the later-established Soros Centers in other countries as well. Documentation and archiving is always also an act of selection and, thus, a canon of Eastern European art in the latter half of the twentieth century was gradually consolidated through the work of the Centers and acquired increasing international awareness (Gardner 2015, 109–110).

Erste Group’s Kontakt Collection played a comparably important role in the making of this nascent canon. The collecting principle has been to trace the artistic practice accompanying the social and political developments in Central and Southeastern Europe since the late 1950s, with special emphasis on conceptual art forms from the 1960s and ’70s. In building and expanding the collection, Erste was certainly able to profit from this new canon-in-progress: some works were already bought on the art market, as opposed to directly from artists’ studios, or, if the latter was the case, Erste often proudly got hold of the last purchasable pieces from this or that reputable artist. Procuring artworks with market value has of course helped to keep the aggregate value of the Kontakt Collection growing.

“Promoting the understanding of a differently lived past”

Both foundations seem to have had other incentives to step in, beyond or beside the benevolent aim of bolstering the art sector. The various civic organizations the Soros Foundations funded had as their aim the spreading of the idea of a Karl Popperian “open society” and implicitly the promise of liberal democracy. Being one of the very few agents of cultural change entering the post-communist arena in the 1990s, the Soros Foundation ushered in a specific lingo conceiving of aesthetic practice as a phenomenon capable of “introducing,” “connecting,” “providing platforms,” “building bridges,” “bridging the gap,” and “developing models of integration.”⁹ Many contemporary protagonists nevertheless

think that the operation was rather to facilitate the transition to democracy. The brief for those running the Centers of Contemporary Art spelled out their main role as facilitating, through engaging in contemporary art practices, the transformation to an “open society” from a closed society – from a totalitarian social order. The emerging new institutional landscape was to mediate this particular transformation.

According to their own accounts, many in the generation of emerging young art professionals were fairly unprepared for the political change in the early 1990s in that they used the notions of democracy and capitalism as two interchangeable terms. This had been a particular slippage between the two terms, which was retrospectively captured in the mental image of them having been on the barricades calling for democracy and eventually, getting capitalism as a free gift with it . . . Some of the viral readings of the time, like Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” (Fukuyama 1989) gave support to this perception of a blissful marriage between democracy and capitalism.

In case of ERSTE, developing a regional charity profile is undoubtedly associated with the eastward expansion of the Erste Group, a retail banking group that had acquired a number of subsidiary banks in East-Central and Southeastern European countries since 1997. Through its Foundation, the Erste Group now invests its dividends into those societies where the money itself was earned. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Erste Bank obtained major credit institutions and savings banks, and this expansion route had practically earmarked Prague and Bratislava as the sites of the first two tranzit offices, still before the ERSTE Foundation was set up and started its philanthropic operations. In the early years, the local Erste Banks were entrusted with managing the sponsoring activity. Upon its launch, the Budapest tranzit was allotted a considerable sum (€100,000), however, it was not easy for its partner, the Hungarian Erste Bank, to comprehend this command of the central bank or rather, to identify with the kind of non-representational, discursive, and experimental contemporary art programme that tranzit.hu stood for from the very beginning. Back then, there was no definite policy on whether and how tranzit.hu and the bank were supposed to cooperate (the first donation transaction of the above-mentioned sum was merely documented on an A4 sheet of paper, too). This lack of clear definition sometimes led to alarming moments when, for instance, a new marketing director came up with the idea that artists should design debit and credit cards . . . This approach to promoting contemporary art was surely different than what either the Foundation or the cultural protagonists involved envisioned.

On another note, Stiftung did not try to enforce any clearly recognizable policy line on the activities of the local tranzit offices, unlike the Soros Centers that avowedly favoured some selected, internationally trending artistic styles (media art and socially engaged public art). Individual tranzit offices have been free to choose whether they wish to align with hyped discourses, keep a keen eye on the art market, or keep their distance from the mainstream.

PATTERNS, an overarching programme of ERSTE, nevertheless gave a fairly precise, and very well-received, framework for the kind of projects it wanted to support: those focusing on the visual arts and culture of the 1960s until today and “seek[ing] to promote understanding and knowledge of a differently lived past, which can facilitate a shared present and future.”¹⁰ At the same time, the clearly stated outline allowed for a high degree of freedom in conceptualizing and implementing the actual projects promoted. An undeniable benefit for independent art initiatives of being institutionalized as “tranzit.org” was

that they could successfully apply for EU grants. Well, with the caveat that this went on till about 2010 or 2012; after that, most of their applications have tended to fail. EU policy has changed and turned towards funding larger institutions such as universities and museums. The reason for this must have been that the sort of intangible small-size institutions like a tranzit office cannot possibly generate the desired degree of visibility. The Open Society Foundations have also undergone a major restructuring in the past year or so, and they, too, seem now to turn away from supporting independent isolated initiatives worldwide (which some interpret as having been the original strength of the OSF) and prefer investing in large-scale ventures promising more visibility and more tangible effects.

Despite all their lenience regarding the content the tranzit-offices produce, visibility as such has been an issue with the ERSTE Foundation as well, even if it's a fuzzy one. On the one hand, there has been some tacit understanding that only a limited degree of international visibility can be generated through the kind of portfolio of the tranzits whose mission and primary aim are to respond to local demands and questions. On the other hand, the Foundation's staff has often run into difficulties when transmitting to the managing board the importance of local, small-scale activities. In this sense, Bratislava has been in a lucky geographical position: Erste representatives can more often visit events there, as they only need to hop on a short train ride or arrange a bus excursion to experience those programmes.

Networks top-down and bottom-up

A further similarity between the two foundations is that they not only supported individuals or individual projects but were also intent on building a network across the region. A significant difference, however, is that while the SCCA network was created and administered in a top-down fashion by an external "parent" foundation, the ERSTE-supported tranzit network came to life with the conscious involvement of local actors.

But even while the SCCA-network may have been perceived from the outside as a kind of monolithic bloc following centrally provided and pre-modelled manuals, protocols, kind of blueprints for projects and templates of activities, in reality every Soros Art Center operated within very particular situated conditions, which led to intense internal discussions. One of these is clustered around the pathway of institution-building: what kind of institutional model does each location want to implement? In the case of Bratislava, the initial crew tended towards the model of a public institution, a site of living in common. Importantly, these debates accompanied the implementation of the Slovak Center's programme, the content of which was developed beyond the standardized operational structures, by the local actors themselves: artists, curators, cultural managers, organizers, educators, and so on. The degree of local protagonists' involvement thus qualifies the oft-repeated criticism according to which the SCCA-network was an alien intervention from the West into an as yet uncontaminated East just recovering from totalitarian oppression.

Erste's initial idea to consolidate the regional focus may have been taking shape with an eye to the series of large-scale "new Europe" exhibitions that proliferated in the early transformation years and were revived in the mid-2000s after a number of post-socialist countries gained accession to the EU.¹¹ The art professionals were commissioned with elaborating the regional focus: Kathrin Rhomberg, at the time curator at the Secession

and possessing some affinity towards the art scenes of the (post-)socialist area, and Maria Hlavajová, former director of the Soros-funded Center for Contemporary Arts in Bratislava. They submitted the proposition that a longer-term vision would provide a more sustainable framework to support East-Central European art and artists than a single representative grand show. Hlavajová's SCCA experience was a tremendous asset in instigating this conceptual shift towards assessing and catering to local needs.

As soon as the Czech and Slovak tranzits started operation, a great number of events were organized; the funds they had available created almost endless opportunities. The deliberate inclusion of local art professionals into conceptual development and directorial positions is another decisive factor distinguishing the SCCA-network and the tranzit offices. ERSTE not only consciously involved local art professionals but also made it a point to preserve this pool of experts. The Foundation kept individual curators, authors, and researchers connected through reunion meetings, among other things, even after their projects had ended.

The much more hierarchical organizational structure of the Soros enterprise has elicited criticism on several occasions; in its case, a charismatic but otherwise fairly random and, at that, external or "foreign" person was put in charge of building up a regionwide network and devising its broad thematic orientation. Suzy Mészöly came from Australia and had been only tangentially connected to the field of contemporary art beforehand.

But to what degree did the four (later five) independent tranzit offices operate as a network? Is the network-character reflected in the locations selected and have meaningful collaborations evolved between the various network hubs? A sober pragmatic reason easily explains the location selection: the financial activities of the Erste Group were expanding eastwards. Beyond this objective motive, however, a set of values have gradually emerged and been shared across the offices and their teams. A predilection for community-oriented and participatory practices as well as site-specificity prominently feature in these shared values. The fact that most tranzit directors were well-established members of the art community attracted international invitations for collaboration as a networked collective. As their very first joint venture, they curated an exhibition (*Auditorium, Stage, Backstage – An Exposure in 32 Acts*) in the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2006; this was commissioned by a Spanish colleague, Chus Martínez, director of the Kunstverein at the time. Another invitation followed in 2010 to co-curate, with two other collectives, Manifesta 8, Europe's roving biennial (which took place in Murcia, Spain). The collaborations culminated in the joint tranzit.org project *Report on the Construction of a Spaceship Module* in New York's New Museum in 2014 as part of the museum's series presenting new institutional practices. The shared values and the mutual trust developed with time greatly helped in reaching consensus when realizing these exciting and challenging grand projects. These international invitations could also soothe, to some degree, the Board's worries about the (in)visibility of the tranzit-network's activities.

Regarding the history of the network, it may be important to note that the Romanian tranzit was founded 10 years later. Despite the presence of the SCCA Bucharest throughout the 1990s, the Romanian contemporary art world still had no dynamic institutions in the mid-2000s (Ratiu 2011, 107). There was no fitting venue to accommodate someone endorsing cutting-edge international discourses, like Raluca Voinea, for instance,

a graduate of the curating programme at the *Royal College of Art in London*. *New institutions that emerged – for example* MNAC (Muzeul Național de Artă Contemporană al României/National Museum of Contemporary Art, established in 2004), located in the People's House, built under the Ceaușescu regime and concurrently housing two chambers of the Romanian Parliament – were rather objectionable venues for someone trained in critical thought. This circumstance urged local actors to look for and seize opportunities as individuals.

When the intention to start tranzit.ro took shape, it was the directors of the already existing network offices who submitted names to be invited to apply. During the application process, however, four of the 10 invitees decided that they were unwilling to compete with each other and banded together instead, lobbying for a four-person-strong tranzit team, located in different Romanian cities. They now divide the yearly budget and rotate the position of the chair between themselves: a respectful commitment and a striking example of how an unbecoming institutional context can lead to collective and network(ed) thinking.

A shift from small acts to broader recognition, from culture to policy

These days, neither the Soros Foundation/OSF nor ERSTE sponsor culture in any orchestrated way anymore, having shifted their primary focus to public policy, and it is doubtful what recognition the former dedication to cultural support still enjoys within the organizations. The OSF made no attempt to retrieve and store documentation related to the activities of the SCCAs. If the staff or director of an SCCA quit his/her position and change his/her place of residence, the archive and documentation they had built over the years faced a precarious faith: they were either preserved by eventual follow-up institutions or the individuals formerly running the Centers – or they simply perished. Two recent exhibitions set out to review and rescue the brief history of their national SCCA or the whole network. Under the title *control < cultivate > evolve: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts – Ljubljana (1993–1999). Its Organisation and Impact*, curators Jasna Jernejšek and Miha Kelemina looked into the Center's links to the local art scene, its exhibition programme as well as financing mechanism.¹² SCCA – Ljubljana operated as part of the Open Society Institute – Slovenia. Its direct successor, the NGO Center for Contemporary Arts SCCA – Ljubljana has been running several teaching and service activities like the World of Art School for Curatorial Practices and Critical Writing. Los Angeles-based curator Aaron Moulton attempted, with two subsequent editions of his show *The Influencing Machine*, to provide an anthropological study about the legacy of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Network.¹³

ERSTE largely reduced the scope of its cultural sponsorship from 2017 onwards, and the Foundation's current website only contains sparse information on the three still-running programmes, but no "archive" tab leads to information about previous arts- and culture-related activities.¹⁴ Obviously, the tranzit network itself already experienced its first crisis in 2008, when its budget was reduced by 25%. Another round of budget cut took place more or less simultaneously with a profile restructuring at the sponsoring foundation. The latter was arguably linked to the perceived decline of democracy in Europe, which pushed contemporary art into the shadow of bolstering civil society. The tranzit offices, too, were required to emphasize their NGO character from that point on.

The past 3–5 years have seen an increase in professionalization and standardization, if not corporatization of procedures. Contemporary art offices are now to write impact calls for 3 years ahead detailing the results they want to achieve. This is then followed by an evaluation discussion monitoring to what degree those goals were indeed realized. Simultaneously, community-oriented and participatory practices have been gaining even more prominence in all tranzit offices' programme planning. One of tranzit.hu's current projects, "Space of Opportunity" (Lehetőségek Tere), a community space for young participants offering a variety of events, actually matches this profile change pretty well.

The NGO Academy represents ERSTE's own steps in this direction. It is in cooperation with the Vienna University of Economics and Business, through which members of Eastern European civic organizations receive training and coaching. As this partnership suggests, connecting with high-profile or large institutions is becoming increasingly important for the visibility of the Stiftung as well. It is somewhat surprising from this perspective that one of the main – and indeed, gigantic – programmes of the ERSTE Foundation, "Social Development," was phased out around 2010. Perhaps less surprising, if we evaluate this occurrence from the Foundation's perspective: ERSTE used to be a grant-giving foundation, and they are now evolving into the operational kind. This means that instead of funding the projects of external applicants, they are now devising and implementing initiatives of their own. This can also explain the regrettable winding up of some well-received programmes and the system of external applications for individual curatorial or artistic projects as well. A section of ERSTE's broad educational programme used to be PATTERNS LECTURES, a curriculum development grant scheme to introduce new university courses in higher education institutions in Central and South Eastern Europe in the fields of art history, cultural theory, and cultural studies that aim to analytically deal with the period starting from the 1960s and leading up to the year of transition in 1989 and beyond, to the present day. PATTERNS endowed a budget and with that a range of opportunities (international academic exchange through study visits, hosting guest lecturers, library development) that were otherwise impracticable in the often under-financed national universities in the countries targeted. PATTERNS LECTURES was first launched in 2010 as a one-off event to be implemented in the academic year 2010/11 only. Its obvious success, however, brought to life subsequent rounds of application and implementation, turning the grant scheme into a steady fixture in the Stiftung's portfolio. PATTERNS was well received not only because of the significant financial means it allotted but also because of the innovation it called for in terms of both themes and teaching methodologies, all of which carried the chance to re-invigorate oftentimes obsolete university curricula.

The remaining main pillars encompass the Kontakt collection, the tranzit.org network, and the Igor Zabel Award for Culture and Theory. The latter was created in 2008 to honour the memory of the Slovenian curator, critic, and writer Igor Zabel (1958–2005). The award is to acknowledge the work of cultural theorists and art professionals who produce and internationally disseminate knowledge on the cultural landscape of ex-socialist countries.¹⁵

Transition, transformation, and the cultural logic of neoliberal expansion

More recent academic discussions of East-Central Europe's "long transformation" attempt to move away from a certain teleological approach that would suggest that developments after 1989 pointed towards a singular known end: the "normalization" of ex-Eastern Bloc economies and politics according to Western (European) models, i.e. capitalism and democracy. Perhaps, the term "transition" (which has now been largely abandoned) expressed this connotation most succinctly. Despite the academic aspiration to bring about a pluralistic and less teleological view on the transformation process, a sort of art critical consensus regards the SCCAs network as a conduit of exactly this transition. Some former heads and associates of the Soros Centers propose that the paradigm of contemporary art advanced by the SCCA network incarnated the cultural logic of global neoliberal capitalist expansion. After all, the ERSTE Foundation is associated with a "foreign" banking group, similarly contributing to the assimilation of the region into the global financial market.

Indeed, this sort of involvement of cultural sponsors has created, and continues to create, a complicated context for assessing their presence and activities. When it first appeared, the Soros Network operated under seriously adversarial combative local conditions inasmuch as it was both attacked by both the progressive left and from the (re-)emerging right. The progressive left championed the correct argument that the Centers for Contemporary Art incarnated the *cultural* logic of global neoliberal capitalist expansion: they were not merely putting into effect a new contemporary arts infrastructure, but they were there to facilitate the integration of the "unspoiled" East into the already existing neoliberal/capitalist framework of the West. On the surface level, this does not sound much unlike the argument of the nationalist right alleging that the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art have been an agent of a global Jewish conspiracy. Such incriminations criminalized the SCCA-project while intimidating, threatening, and bullying those affiliated with it, while at the same time preparing the pathways to the present-day illiberal democracies we see rising in Central and Eastern Europe – and beyond.

An intrinsic contradiction accompanied the first years of collaboration within the tranzit network, too. Office heads and their team gleefully called themselves an independent network, which was true from the perspective of content (no one prescribed whether they were to support individual artists, organize exhibitions, or make publications, etc.), but at the end of the day, this independence was dependent on the financial backing of a bank. With time, the understanding arose that the incorporation of criticality might just as well be part of the philanthropic activity of a corporation. This led to the comprehension of the inherent tension in situations when critical discourses are being sponsored by the very entities implicated in the critique. Large companies often indeed whitewash their otherwise disreputable transactions by sponsoring critical art practices. On the other side of the coin, Erste Bank had been founded as a savings bank and has always considered itself as a social bank as well: its banking products have aimed to help small investors, giving loans to small business initiatives who tend to have little to no money. The conservative, if not outright nationalist, cultural-political line currently preferred by the Hungarian government further complicates this issue: in this situation, it is indeed a financial institution's money that allows tranzit.hu's – politically—independent existence and content-providing abilities.

The presumption that the amalgamation of market capitalism and liberal democracy create the only valid frame for good social organization after 1989 goes back to Francis Fukuyama's influential essay "The End of History?" the author having been a neoconservative political scientist and economist at the time of writing the piece. Of all people, the same Fukuyama – more recently identified as a Democrat though – was invited in 2019 to give the first lecture (Fukuyama 2019) in the series of Tipping Point Talks, one of the repurposed ERSTE Foundation's own programmes. One may be intrigued by this choice and ask, what this selection of speaker might possibly tell us about the dividing line between current (neo)conservative and (neo)liberal mindsets? Tipping Point Talks is the result of another cooperation with an illustrious partner, the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* (Institute for Human Sciences) in Vienna. Through its selection of themes and topics, the Foundation actually takes a stand on current affairs. A general claim of Fukuyama, the first prestigious guest in the series, is that capitalism is not replaceable, it is and will be ubiquitous. It can be duly criticized but it is, nevertheless, the only viable economic and political systems. This stance is certainly easily tenable for a bank – and a lot harder for some of its beneficiaries who are less conservatively inclined.

The Foundation is also positioning itself through its prominent invited speakers and through supporting quality journalism in the "Balkans" (which has been another long-standing commitment of ERSTE). The art-related programmes cannot hope to compete with these items; there is a relatively small number of people out there who are aware and appreciate that a contemporary art curator receives ERSTE's Igor Zabel Award for his or her eminent work . . . The Kontakt Collection, once at the core of Erste's culture-oriented engagement is likely to give them a headache these days. It is kept in storage, which surely has very high costs, and yet is virtually invisible. The tradition of earlier small-scale travelling exhibitions introduced by collection curator Walter Seidl has been abandoned for some reason.

Encompassing the post-socialist space

ERSTE Foundation's affiliation with the Erste Group also demarcates the geographical range of the Foundation's cultural engagement and explains why the former East Germany has fallen out of its scope. The museums and other cultural institutions of the former GDR (re-baptized as Germany's "new federal states" after reunification) soon fell under federal German cultural funding and thus offered no sphere of activity in the 1990s for the Soros Foundation either. Partly as a result of this division, the ERSTE Foundation or the individual tranzit offices only have sparse links or only sporadically sought collaboration with the (East) German art scene.

The ERSTE-supported landmark exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Museum moderner Kunst / MUMOK, Vienna, 2009; Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2010) certainly had an "East" German colleague in its pool of researchers. There is also an East German chapter included in tranzit's online exhibition archive *Parallel Chronologies: Collection of Exhibitions in Eastern Europe 1950–1989*. Tranzit.hu's international magazine on art and culture, *Mezosfera*, has featured a contribution by Dresden-based Kathleen Reinhardt on new approaches to the art of the GDR, and she also participated in a symposium convened around a thematic issue. Attila Tordai from tranzit.

ro in Cluj often cooperates with artist Elske Rosenfeld, but rather along shared topics instead of Rosenfeld's belonging to the former GDR.

The Austrian office has a special position within the tranzit "family." A sort of network coordinating role on their side is discernible, while Georg Schöllhammer, director of the Austrian tranzit, certainly has a rare expertise in the art of the post-Soviet area all the way to the Caucasus and Central Asia, which had been manifest both in his work as editor for *Springer* (one of the leading magazines of art and cultural studies in the German-speaking realm) and the profile of tranzit.at.

In terms of the bank's geographical expansion, Ukraine was among the newly accessed countries and yet, no tranzit office was set up there. Its art scene nevertheless received substantial ERSTE support, including the Kyiv Biennial, initiated in 2015. But there is no Croatian tranzit either, despite the country's EU membership and the Foundation's strong engagement with the successor states of Yugoslavia. The reason for this might be that, quite contrary to Romania, a robust curatorial collective WHW (What, How, and for Whom) started its multifaceted operation in Zagreb in 1999. Without becoming a local tranzit office, they could still have access to support from ERSTE, as an open application system for project grants was in place until 2017.

Coming back to possible joint ventures with the "new federal states," some initiatives dwindled because the themes endorsed by tranzit were unlikely to be of interest "over there," as the same Dresden colleague once surmised. This supposition is corroborated by the observation that, in the wake of the revolutions of 1989, the former Communist Bloc became fragmented from the perspective of art and cultural history. If so, this fragmentation contributes to the multiplication of post-transformation narratives: the GDR and the Soviet Union came to form their own research fields, while the countries in between still remain fairly invisible to international scholarship. At the same time, a formerly dormant cross-regional interest in the contemporary art production of neighbouring countries has started to gradually develop in the past ten-fifteen years. I want to suggest that this new dynamics of cultural exchange was partly the result of the initiatives of the Soros and especially the ERSTE Foundations, aiming to facilitate a shared understanding of the present, growing out of the experience of the recent past. At the same time, they also branded East-Central and Southeastern European art on the international market and in the professional community. The former East Germany has been largely left out of this new regionalism and, consequently, the art of the GDR remains largely unknown to specialists of Eastern Europe and beyond. The new federal states and post-socialist Eastern Europe are seldom viewed in the same conceptual framework: after all, East Germans did not return to the "West" as citizens of a post-communist state, but as members of a new Germany.

Notes

1. The emergence of one such model in a formerly East German city is delineated in Franciska Zólyom's contribution "Role models vs. modes of rule. The foundation of GfZK, a public-private museum in Leipzig" of the current issue.
2. The term "open society" was given great currency by philosopher Karl Popper around 1945. In Popper's view, totalitarian ideologies typically resort to oppression in order to impose their

vision on society, whereas an open society is based above all on citizen rights, democracy, as well as faith in reason and the freedom of choice.

3. The Soros Foundations were later renamed the Open Society Institute (OSI, 1993–2000) and they currently operate as the Open Society Foundations.
4. Two such endeavours are reviewed in this journal issue; see Galliera, pp. xx and Hock, pp. xx.
5. The speakers in this exchange use various terms to refer to the geographical area under discussion. The author did not seek to impose a consistent terminology for the sake of the written publication either.
6. This art-in-architecture project is documented in the publication *The Canaletto View* (Bal-Blanc and Rhomberg 2020).
7. The Foundation for Arts Initiatives is a private foundation that has been making grants in the arts since 1999, independent of any governments, agencies, NGOs, or their related agendas (<https://ffaiarts.net>).
8. The Mládeks later established the Jan and Meda Mládek Foundation (1999) in the Czech Republic and opened Museum Kampa in Prague to present the collection of modern art that they had assembled.
“over the previous decades.
9. See also Hlavajová (2006, 153) and Buden (2018, also personal communication).
10. See the Call for Submissions for the programme PATTERNS_Researching and Understanding Recent Cultural History (issued October 2007).
11. To reference only a few of the best known of these shows: *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-communist Europe* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, and various locations, 1999 and after); *Aspekte/Positionen: 50 Jahre Kunst aus Mitteleuropa 1949–1999* (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2000); and, specifically focused on Southeastern Europe, *In Search of Balkania* (Neue Galerie Graz, 2002) and *Blood & Honey/Future's in the Balkans* (Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg bei Wien, 2003).
12. On view in Škuc Gallery, May – June 2019.
13. The show was on view at Galeria Nicodim in Bucharest in the Spring of 2019, and later in Warsaw's Ujazdowski Castle – Center for Contemporary Art, between June and November 2022. The latter exhibition is discussed in the review section of this Special Issue.
14. For a period after the shift towards policy, all culture-related information disappeared from the website; the content has been back online again since summer 2022.
15. Nominees are cultural protagonists who come from or are based in the region.

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