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# BEYOND MUSIC: THE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE LEGACY OF THE EXIT FOUNDATION – A RETROSPECTIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a term used to describe strategies companies apply to make them more ethical and friendly towards the community. The subject whose CSR activities proved to be of special interest, because of the scope of their influence, is the EXIT Foundation, the official organizer of the famous EXIT Festival, which has been held at the Petrovaradin Fortress in Novi Sad, Serbia since 2000. On the tenth anniversary of the founding of the EXIT Foundation, it was decided to conduct a retrospective analysis of the socially responsible activities conducted by this foundation. This analysis aimed to determine what types of CSR activities were conducted by the Foundation to pinpoint the main field of action, what fields were neglected, and to whom further attention should be given in the future. The multidimensional approach of implemented socially responsible initiatives made it impossible to identify a key field that could potentially be considered the focus of the CSR activities of the EXIT Foundation. However, based on the impact achieved by the festival itself, the need to focus future initiatives on the dimension of environmental protection was identified.

**Keywords:** EXIT Festival, EXIT Foundation, corporate social responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

Festivals represent symbols of a country's culture reflecting the lifestyle, cultural standards, importance of culture, the fine boundaries between different art forms, as well as the need for togetherness and shared experiences (Hunyadi, 2004). These events can significantly influence all aspects of economic, cultural, and social life, bringing about both positive and negative effects. Some of the most harmful negative effects include changes in culture and the way of living of the local community, increased crime rates (Tsundoda & Mendlinger, 2009), inflation, crowding and congestion (Shelton, 2017), spatial and noise pollution, loss of value, destruction of historical resources and cultural heritage (Prodanović-Stamenović, 2015).

To combat these negative effects, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) was created. CSR implies that companies and other legal entities consider the interests of the community by accepting responsibility for the impact of their conduct on customers, suppliers, workers, members of the community, and other relevant stakeholders in their environment. CSR refers to the strategies that companies apply, which impact their business in a way that makes them more ethical and friendly towards the community (Ismail, 2009).

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The festival whose CSR activities proved to be of special interest to the public, because of the scope of their influence, is the EXIT Festival, held at the Petrovaradin Fortress in Novi Sad, Serbia. Established in 2000 through a student movement with the goal of introducing democratic reforms in Serbia, this festival advocates for peace, democracy, multiculturalism, and human rights. These principles have evolved into integral components of its identity (Pivac et al., 2019), shaped over time through a distinctive electronic music lineup, various socially responsible initiatives, and robust support for humanitarian, environmental, and cultural causes and organizations. Due to its exceptionality, the EXIT Festival was declared the best European festival at the British Festival Awards in 2007, and it won the title of “Best European Festival” in 2013 and 2017 at the European Festival Awards (Internet 1).

The EXIT Foundation, which represents an integral component of the EXIT Festival team dedicated to social activism, was established in 2013. Its mission is to catalyze positive social transformation by utilising creative industries and organising events encompassing art, education, and humanitarian efforts. Through its endeavors, the Foundation played a pivotal role in Novi Sad being honored with the distinction of European Capital of Culture for 2022 and the prestigious title of Youth Capital of Europe in 2019 (Internet 2).

On the tenth anniversary of the EXIT Foundation, it was decided to conduct a retrospective analysis of the socially responsible activities conducted by this foundation. This analysis aimed to determine what types of CSR initiatives were conducted by the Foundation, to pinpoint what was the main field of action, what fields were neglected, and to whom further attention should be given in the future.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout history, communities from different regions around the world have faced specific and difficult challenges. In those moments of need, human awareness and empathy came to light as communities worked together not only to create solutions for their problems, but also to help others in need. According to Angela (2006), foundations were initially created to support charitable, social, cultural, and scientific activities. Foundations, as we know them today, were established around the world to support charitable organizations and help solve problems. These organizations have had a positive effect on the global community by fostering international cooperation, understanding, and appreciation of other cultures and religions (Internet 3).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to the accountability of an organization or another legal entity for the impact of their decisions and actions on both society and the environment. This involves introducing transparent and ethical practices that align with the principles of sustainable development and contribute to the well-being of society. CSR considers the expectations of stakeholders, it is consistent with the law and international norms of behavior, and implemented throughout the organization (Slob & Oonk, 2007; Gorski et al. 2014). CSR activities in a country are shaped by its cultural values, economic and political systems, as well as the achieved level of development, and therefore it is necessary to adapt them and the related messages to the target market (Matten & Moon, 2008; Noga & Le Viet-Błaszczuk 2023).

The correlation between CSR and foundations is evident in their mutual commitment to nurturing positive change (Someshwari and Laxmana, 2020). To achieve the intended objectives, collaboration with various stakeholders is achieved through diverse activities and initiatives. This collaborative effort results in benefits for all parties involved (Greenwood, 2007; Goodman et al., 2017).

Gorski et al. (2014) underlined in their research the importance of striking a balance between economic, social, and ecological objectives to establish sustainability. This involves maximizing present well-being without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Consequently, CSR has gained significance for organizations as their key stakeholders now expect them to address not only economic concerns but also environmental and social issues relevant to the stakeholders. Over the past few decades, governments in numerous countries have shown increasing political interest in philanthropic foundations, aiming to foster partnership relations by integrating foundations into state administration (Anheier, 2018; Phillips,



2018; Toepler, 2017; Levy et al., 2023). This underscores the pivotal role of governments as crucial stakeholders for organizations, including foundations, emphasizing the necessity of collaborative endeavors for achieving enduring global sustainability.

### *Field of Education*

Through their philanthropic initiatives, foundations impact educational policy and school reform. By offering grants to colleges and universities, community-based or national nonprofits, membership organizations, or associations of colleagues and universities (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors & TIAA Institute, 2019) they influence policy domains, levels of government involvement, and tactics for mobilizing additional resources and thus shape the education system (Sessions et al., 2016). The benefits of a foundation's investment in education extend beyond immediate academic gains. Improved academic performance is one outcome, followed by cultivating non-academic skills that contribute to holistic growth and development among students (Wood & Lithauer, 2006). In their endeavors, foundations try to provide easier access and success for low-income, first-generation students, contribute to career readiness, provide faculty support, and influence policy, advocacy, and system change, with larger foundations being more likely to support policy and systemic change across the entire field of higher education (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors & TIAA Institute, 2019). In cooperation with NIS Company from 2013 until 2019 the EXIT Foundation conducted the "Youth Heroes" campaign that aimed to promote positive examples to the youth of Serbia, ceremonially awarding the best achievers in the fields of education and science, entrepreneurship and creative industries, social activism, culture, and art (Internet 4).

### *Field of Economy*

Investing in the economy provides numerous benefits for foundations, such as challenging traditional assumptions about economic development strategies and enhancing the well-being of numerous individuals (Heslop et al., 2019). This aligns with the principles of CSR, where foundations actively contribute to societal welfare through their economic pursuits. Furthermore, foundation-owned enterprises perform comparably to investor-owned counterparts, boasting similar accounting profitability, reduced risk, and steady growth (Thomsen & Hansmann, 2013). Additionally, foundations can leverage program investments to generate positive social impacts while expanding their assets (Rosener, 2013). Notably, investments in nonprofit activities can yield substantial social and economic returns, for example, each dollar invested in grants and support is estimated to generate \$8.58 in economic benefits (Shapiro & Mathur, 2008). This underscores how foundation activities contribute not only to their expansion but also to societal well-being. In 2014, the EXIT Foundation conducted the BE HUMAN events, which raised over 140,000 euros during a two-night exclusive party and donor dinner to assist those affected by unprecedented floods (Internet 5).

### *Field of Environment*

Environmental projects not only drive sustainable profitability but also improve the image of companies and foundations (Little, 1995). These efforts exemplify responsible corporate citizenship and demonstrate how foundations can use their financial influence to drive positive environmental change, aligning with corporate social responsibility principles that encourage businesses and foundations to contribute to the greater good. Furthermore, environmental projects foster the trust of external stakeholders and provide a competitive advantage for international expansion (Marco-Fondevila et al., 2018). In 2020, the EXIT Foundation launched the Conscious R:evolution platform which brought together leading global speakers, artists, scien-



tists, entrepreneurs, and activists to discuss the possible directions of collective and individual development of humanity, to achieve an entirely different way of looking at the planet and life (Internet 6).

### *Field of Health and Safety*

Foundations play a crucial role in investing significantly in health and safety by fostering a safety-oriented culture within health institutions, supporting research endeavors aimed at enhancing patient safety and improving the efficiency of healthcare systems. This dedication to health and safety aligns with the foundational principles centered on fostering positive social impact (Vincent & Amalberti, 2016; Sessions et al., 2016). Moreover, foundations actively addressing environmental hazards, such as air and water pollution to mitigate these risks, and minimize potential harm to individuals and communities, underscoring their broader commitment to enhancing public welfare (Galt & Paschal, 2009). By integrating high-reliability principles into healthcare processes, foundations initiate cultural shifts that prioritize safety and quality outcomes. This contributes to improved healthcare operations and actively promotes a safer environment for both patients and healthcare professionals. Such initiatives demonstrate the foundations' dedication to positive social change (Oster & Deakins, 2018). Furthermore, foundations are extending their efforts to modernize public health infrastructure, a pivotal step in safeguarding national health and ensuring its security. Their commitment to advancing public health resonates with their broader philanthropic goals and underscores their initiative-taking role as contributors to social welfare (Green, 2004). In 2019, the EXIT Foundation, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia and Telekom Serbia, initiated a large national campaign “#Stayclean“, which aimed to promote a clean life, without the use of drugs (Internet 7).

### *Field of Social and Cultural Development*

Investing in social and cultural issues can positively impact people and communities, as foundations leverage their financial, human, and social capital to achieve tangible results (Zolfaghari & Hand 2021). Such investments additionally show a foundation's commitment to sustainable and holistic development, a basic tenet of the philosophy of socially responsible business practices. As foundations use their resources to make a positive impact, they exemplify a commitment to building a better society for the current and future generations. In 2017, responding to growing national tensions in the region, the EXIT Foundation launched the "Silent Balkans Majority“. In an open letter, prominent artists and public figures from Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina urged the public to openly oppose extreme national rhetoric and promote peace in the region (Internet 8).

### *Field of Infrastructure*

Investments in basic infrastructure affect the local community. Studies have indicated that such investments can help strengthen rural economies, promote economic growth and social development (Pavel et al., 2018). In addition to increasing local incomes, they also positively affect neighboring regions (Montolio, 2018). Additionally, infrastructure investment policies implemented at the local level can lead to temporary reductions in unemployment and significant declines in crime rates (Gnade et al., 2017). In 2018, in collaboration with NIS Company and the City of Novi Sad, the EXIT Foundation renovated the building "Mala Stražara“ at the Petrovaradin Fortress, which is used by the Astronomical Society of Novi Sad as an observatory. This building, which dates from the 18th century, represents an important cultural heritage, whose renewal enriched the offer of the entire Petrovaradin Fortress complex (Internet 9).



## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods used in this study include the analytical method (comparative analysis), the descriptive method, and the synthesis of induction and deduction. Comparative analysis involves comparing the similarities and differences between two or more researched problems or phenomena to identify the rules governing their interrelations (Peličić et al., 2015). The descriptive method focuses on the description of processes and phenomena (Vuković & Štrbac, 2019). Deduction represents a path of scientific knowledge that starts from a generally accepted premise to draw conclusions for individual and specific cases. Induction represents the reverse path of cognition starting from the collected data based to derive conclusion is drawn (Peličić et al., 2015).

To conduct a retrospective review of the socially responsible activities conducted by the EXIT Foundation from 2013 to 2023, an on-site survey was conducted. Data on the initiatives were extracted from the “Projects” section on the official EXIT Foundation website, which listed all the projects undertaken by the Foundation since its inception. It is important to note that only publicly accessible data sources were used in the analysis.

The initiatives were grouped based on the duration, the types of stakeholders involved, and the fields they addressed. Based on their legal status, stakeholders were divided into five groups: enterprises, government institutions, media outlets, the non-governmental sector, and foundations. Although media outlets fall under the category of enterprises, they were analyzed separately to understand the scope of media coverage of the initiatives. The fields covered by the initiatives were segmented into 6 fields - education, economy, environment, health and safety, social and cultural development, and infrastructural development – following the dimensions proposed by authors Panthong and Taecharungroj (2021) in the paper “Which CSR activities are preferred by residents from the local community? Combined and cluster analysis”. This categorization was used because it was perceived as the most suitable for research objectives. Finally, the collected data was processed using Excel.

## RESULTS

Under the “Projects” section on the official EXIT Foundation website, 31 initiatives conducted between 2013 and 2023 were identified. During the period from 2013-2017, which represents the first five years of the foundation’s operation, 41.93% of initiatives were realized. The duration and scope of these initiatives varied, as well as the number of stakeholders involved. However, due to the lack of exact information about the number of stakeholders involved in every conducted initiative, it was impossible to pinpoint the exact number of involved stakeholders by initiative. According to the available data, rough estimates show that the average number is 4.84 stakeholders by an initiative.

The highest number of stakeholders participated in social and cultural development initiatives (Table 1). These stakeholders represented mostly various enterprises and media outlets. In general, enterprises represented a majority of stakeholders involved in the initiatives of the Foundation, followed by media outlets and entities from the non-governmental sector. Out of the six targeted fields, education, and the environment received the least attention and minimal support from media outlets and foundations. Government institutions participated in 19.33% of the initiatives. The involvement of the government sector indicates that the initiatives of the Foundation were recognized as positive and beneficial for the wider community.



**Table 1.** Percentage of stakeholders involved by the type and by the field in the period from 2013 to 2023

Stakeholder	Education	Economy	Environment	Health & Safety	Social & cultural development	Infrastructural development	Sum
Enterprise	2.52	4.20	4.20	4.20	10.08	5.04	30.25
Government institution	0.84	3.36	1.68	2.52	8.40	2.52	19.33
Media outlet	1.68	3.36	0	2.52	10.92	3.36	21.85
Non-governmental sector	2.52	5.04	1.68	3.36	5.04	4.20	21,85
Foundation	0	0.84	1.68	0.84	1.68	1.68	6.72
Sum	7.56	16.81	9.24	13.45	36.13	16.81	100

Source: Authors

Out of the initiatives, 23 of them, or 74.19%, were conducted just once, while the remaining 25.81% were implemented for at least two consecutive years. The initiatives with the longest implementation time were connected to the fields of economy and social and cultural development (Table 2), while the field of infrastructural development was not involved in any long-term initiative.

**Table 2.** Duration of the initiatives (expressed in %) realized in the period from 2013 to 2023.

Duration of implementation	Education	Economy	Environment	Health & Safety	Social & cultural development	Infrastructural development	Sum
Less than 5 years	3.70	9.26	11.11	12.96	31.48	12.96	81.48
More than 5 years	3.70	5.56	1.85	1.85	5.56	0	18.52
Sum	7.41	14.82	12.96	14.81	37.04	12.96	100

Source: Authors

The most notable initiatives implemented for a longer period, from 2013 to 2019, and involving the support from a variety of influential stakeholders, were Youth Fair and Youth Heroes. The Youth Fair represented a regional youth tourism fair that aimed to position the Balkans as a highly attractive destination for youth tourism. The potential of youth tourism, which would allow the countries of the Balkans to achieve significant financial resources, was recognized and thus supported by OPENS, an association of local youth organizations, the Tourist Organization of the City of Novi Sad, and other travel agencies and NGOs that deal with regional connections of young people in the Western Balkans (Internet 10). *Youth Heroes* aimed to showcase young, successful individuals in Serbia across various fields such as education and science, entrepreneurship, creative industries, social activism, culture, and art. The initiative, implemented with the support of the NIS company, aimed to inspire, instill pride, and showcase exceptional individuals who would serve as role models for other young people (Internet 2).

Long-term initiatives that were implemented in 2023 were State of EXIT Zone and Pixelate. The State of EXIT Zone has been an ongoing initiative since 2013. It involves a specially designated zone at the EXIT festival that serves as a platform for young people to meet and exchange ideas about regional support and co-operation, engaging in workshops, panel discussions, exhibitions, and other activities. The Zone features 50 organizations and institutions from Serbia and Europe, which include influential stakeholders such as UNICEF and Heineken (Internet 11). Pixelate is an interesting initiative conducted in collaboration with the



Recan Foundation. It focuses on creating art using cans to raise awareness about the importance of recycling and environmental protection (Internet 12).

Analyzing the initiatives, it was determined that 83.87% were adapted to all ages. A special focus on the younger population was placed within five initiatives, of which the four initiatives State of EXIT Zone, Youth Fair, Pixelate, and Youth Heroes were also the ones with the longest implementation period. These results are not surprising considering that young people represent the target group of the EXIT Festival.

Because of the limited information that is available to the public, the social, economic, and other long and short-term effects of the initiatives were unable to be identified, and therefore any predictions connected to them were excluded from the research.

## ■ DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research paper aimed to conduct a retrospective review of the socially responsible activities conducted by the EXIT Foundation since its establishment in 2013. The objective was to identify which field (education, economy, environment, health and safety, social and cultural development, infrastructural development) has been the Foundation's primary focus, which fields have been neglected and where more attention could be directed in future initiatives.

Observing the results obtained from the online research, it is evident that the target group of the EXIT Foundation is the younger population. The topics, activities, and ways of promoting the initiatives are adapted to their needs. This observation is in line with the goals of the EXIT Foundation, among which the development of young people stands out as a priority activity. The focus on one target group allows for a better alignment with the needs and expectations of visitors and the efficient allocation of available resources (Camilleri, 2018). Consequently, the EXIT Festival has successfully maintained its popularity.

The research also identified a variety of stakeholders including those from the economic, governmental, and non-governmental sectors, providing continuous support and involvement, and recognizing the positive impact of the EXIT Foundation's initiatives beyond the local level. Research conducted in 2010 by "Booz, Allen, Hamilton Inc" focused on the effects of the EXIT festival on the local economy and the direct and indirect benefits to local and national businesses. It concluded that the overall estimated benefits of the festival outweigh the costs, with the estimated impact on the economy and revenues of Novi Sad equaling 13.3 million euros with a multiplication coefficient of 1.9, and the effect on the Serbian economy reflected in revenues of 10.9 million euros with a multiplication coefficient of 2.7 (Prodanovic-Stamenovic, 2015). According to the research published by "TIM Center" in 2022, that year the EXIT Festival contributed an incredible 19.7 million euros to the economy of Serbia. In addition to economic benefits, the EXIT Festival also contributes to the improvement of the image of Novi Sad and Serbia and their promotion as attractive destinations. The EXIT festival also represents a powerful event that can have a great impact on the lives of individuals. Festivals can create an unforgettable experience that will evoke positive feelings in every future association with it, and they influence the building and improvement of relationships with other participants and create a sense of belonging and community (Wilmink, 2023). A "TIM Centar" survey also found that 86% of respondents believed that the EXIT Festival had a positive impact on their mental health (Internet 1). These beneficial effects could be the main reason why the festival gains support from a variety of stakeholders.

Socially responsible initiatives, implemented by the EXIT Foundation over the years, often addressed several topics and combined fields. This multidimensional approach makes it challenging to identify a single field as the Foundation's primary focus. However, based on the research findings, the field of social and cultural development appears to be emphasized the most, followed by the economic and health and safety fields. Contrastingly, Zorzin (2019) identified an economic logic underlying the Foundation's activities, highlighting the temporary privatization of public spaces, like the Petrovaradin Fortress, for profit, coupled with the socialization of costs. Zorzin criticized the lack of investment in the fortress, noting its adverse effects



on cultural heritage and the local population, which experiences limited and short-term benefits. Similarly, Živanović and Nikolić (2019) argued that the EXIT Foundation, as a high-influence stakeholder, has failed to adequately maintain the Petrovaradin Fortress, effectively mismanaging this public space.

Based on the collected data, it remains difficult to determine which field should be prioritized in the upcoming initiatives. The author proposes to focus on the environment, followed by the fields of health and safety and social development and culture. Considering the venue of the EXIT Festival, it is not surprising that the field of environment should be one of the priorities. Due to the cultural significance of the Petrovaradin Fortress, which was placed under the protection of the state because of its value, serious debates have been conducted over the years. Although the Fortress contributes to the attractiveness of the festival itself, it suffers negative impacts on the building and its surroundings. Environmental damage, degradation of green areas, noise, and excessive number of visitors (Pavluković et al., 2019) are just some of the factors that have been highlighted over the years as valid reasons for the relocation of the EXIT Festival. If certain measures were taken, they would contribute to the preservation of the given location and the reduction of its negative impacts, the need for the relocation of the festival venue would be reduced and the conditions that would enable the Petrovaradin Fortress to be added to the UNESCO World Heritage List would potentially be met (Besermenji, 2010).

The EXIT Foundation represents a successful business entity whose initiatives have had a significant positive impact not only on the local but also on the international community. The multidimensional approach of implemented socially responsible initiatives made it impossible to identify a key field that could potentially be considered a "favorite" of the EXIT Foundation. However, based on the impact achieved by the festival itself, the need to focus future initiatives on the dimension of environmental protection was identified. Devoting individual initiatives primarily to increasing awareness of the importance of the Petrovaradin Fortress would contribute to the preservation of this landmark and better valorization of resources.

The limitation of this research is primarily reflected in the lack of more precise data about the undertaken initiatives, which would enable clearer targeting of the fields that they include. Furthermore, other challenges include the lack of data regarding the impact achieved by the given initiatives and the lack of cooperation with the EXIT Foundation in getting key information about their socially responsible activities. Future research could focus on the effects of certain initiatives implemented by the foundation over a specific period. Moreover, if cooperation with the EXIT Foundation was achieved and access to certain information was provided, the given research could be completed and thereby enable the identification of the target field of the EXIT Foundation.

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