



Saaremaa song and dance celebrations

A repository of living traditions



Participatory governance of cultural heritage



SAAREMAA



30,000



Challenge

Song and dance celebrations are a tradition of Saaremaa, and more widely of Estonia and the Baltic states. The Baltic Song and Dance Celebrations have been listed UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2008. These gatherings have been key for Saaremaa's community and cultural participation for over a century, preserving and transmitting the local heritage. The question is how to organise high-quality yet accessible festivals that preserve and revitalise local heritage?



Solution

The celebrations are organised in a participatory way, involving different community groups: From public authorities to civil society as well as dancers and singers. The community participates in making key decisions around the festivals, such as choosing their themes and names. To stay relevant to the community, some traditions have been reinterpreted or blended with modern expressions. This attracts the younger audience in particular.



How ?

- 1 In 2019, the Saaremaa Municipal Government kicked-off the preparations for the 52nd Song and the 47th Dance Celebrations (postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). To ensure civil engagement and community support, public competitions were launched to select the themes and overall vision of these two major events and the artistic committee to implement them. The community submitted proposals and expressed their needs and interests.
- 2 Proposals were then evaluated by a jury composed of representatives of the Saaremaa Municipality, the Saaremaa Folk Culture Society, choir and dance directors, and the Estonian Choir Association.
- 3 To ensure a balance of different interests, an organising committee was formed with representatives from the municipal government, folk culture specialists, community leaders, cultural figures, journalists, choir members and dancers.
- 4 The organising committee launched a public competition to select new dances for the programme, and commissioned new songs from contemporary and well-known musicians who mix and reinterpret traditional folk music.
- 5 The postponed song and dance celebrations will now both take place in 2021

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Budget/Financing

€ 60,000

The total budget for the two celebrations is €60,000 (€30,000 each).

- 75% of the total budget comes from Saaremaa Municipality
- 25% comes from the national government and 5% from sponsors and private investors

Management

- The organising committee manages the two events. It is composed of 20 representatives from the municipal government, non-profit organisations, community leaders, cultural figures, journalists, singers and dancers. The committee is led by the head of the Culture and Sports Department of Saaremaa Municipal Government.
- 44 choirs, 55 folk dance groups, three brass orchestras, eight folk ensembles and one instrumental player are involved in the organising process. In total, 1,600 singers and 2,000 dancers are involved.
- Around 100 volunteers contribute to the organisation of the events. Active community members organise and lead volunteer work.
- Local newspapers and radio are involved as media partners.



Transferability

- The organising process can be transferred to any festival or celebration in Europe, and other song and dance festivals in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.
- Folk festivities are grassroots. Participatory and bottom-up approaches are crucial for communities to truly commit to a project. The process of preparation itself is as important as the outcome.
- Combining funding sources, including private investment and earned revenue ensure the sustainability of an event.
- Public gatherings and cultural events, (respectful of measures in place) will be key to post-crisis mental and social recovery.



Links

[Video of the last edition of the Celebration](#)
[Baltic song and dance celebrations on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#)



Impact

- Popularises folk dance and choral singing among young people and children, allowing inter-generational exchange and the transmission of knowledge and traditions.
- Regular celebrations (every five years) give the community a sense of identity and continuity.
- Promotes cultural diversity and creativity while preserving historic values and traditions.
- Promotes active citizenship and participation in cultural heritage through volunteering.
- Brings the community together at local, regional and national level.
- Contributes to social cohesion by involving all social, gender and age groups.



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