

# Cultural policies in transition, the issue of participation and the challenge of democracy<sup>1</sup>

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The direct and indirect effects that cultural policies had on the development of Western European societies after the Second World War is one of the issues that the cultural community has to deal with today.<sup>2</sup> In order to understand how the cultural sector in the post communist countries of South East Europe tackle this issue, as they struggle to reinvent and to reposition their cultural policies on their government agendas; in order to understand which traditional, but also which new instruments they employ and why; the degree of inspiration they receive from western models; and last but not least, how cultural policy is contributing to the design of new democracies, this article will attempt to offer some keys, based on the broad and surprising experience of the *Policies for Culture* programme (2000-2004), as well as on the broader background.<sup>3</sup>

## *Access and diversity*

Fifty years of Western European evolution have designed cultural policies around the never-ending issue of culture in a democratic environment and its two interlinked aspects: the democratisation of culture and cultural democracy. The first is strongly related to the idea of *access* to cultural goods, as a guarantee of well being and social emancipation. The second is related to the idea of *cultural diversity*, with all its tricky implications, which range from breaking the borders between high and low culture to the more difficult axioms related to peaceful interethnic existence within multicultural societies.<sup>4</sup> But, starting in the early 80's, cultural democracy itself evolved according to rather contradictory dynamics, as culture became at one and the same time a commodity<sup>5</sup>, a "normal" thing and also a "product" of everyday life. This meant that cultural activity - the public good that is supported by state contributions - was supposed to prove what and how it really contributed to social welfare and emancipation, in economic and civic terms. In short, culture had to become accountable. Thus, cultural policies started to open up towards other public sectors in order to confirm and comfort their newly required sustainability. The economic and social impact of the arts is discussed in important studies such as that of Myerscough in the late eighties or

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<sup>1</sup> The article is included in the 2005 publication of the Policies for Culture programme: „The arts, politics and change”, Amsterdam, Boekmanstudies, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The separation between Eastern and Western Europe, which is becoming more and more artificial, is valuable when we regard the history of European cultural policy of the past fifty years. To start with, it is important to stress some of the specificities of Western cultural policy evolution, in order to better highlight present transformations and the critical issues emerging from latest context changes; From this point of view, the end of the Second World War was a critical moment, as critical as the fall of the iron curtain in the 90s.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org) for country coverage.

<sup>4</sup> See also Lise Santerre, 1999, “de la démocratisation de la culture à la démocratie culturelle”, Québec, rapport d'étude, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Bibliothèque Nationale de Québec

<sup>5</sup> Presentation of O. Bennet at the Amsterdam expert meeting: Academic and professional education in cultural policy and management: a European perspective, March 2003, Boekman Stichting

Matarasso<sup>6</sup> in the late nineties. The issue of interaction between culture and development has become critical to intergovernmental organisations and has called for a re-modelling of cultural policies. This was well synthesised in the UNESCO Stockholm summit in 1999, when the “power of culture” was advocated, but also an “action plan” for the coming decades was designed and adopted by the 149 participant countries.

However, the issue of sustainability also had to take into account the outcomes of the above mentioned “shapers “ of cultural policies after the Second World War in Europe, namely *access and accountability*. These had determined a certain attitude toward cultural action. Democratisation implied a banalisation of cultural consumption. Furthermore, state intervention, when large, could lead to “politicising” of cultural content and sometimes an unhealthy interdependency between more general political measures and culture. Culture in the free market, on the contrary, could lead to consumerist behaviour and the onslaught of leisure, the emergence of “cultural goods” and “cultural products”. Large-scale consumption would lead to standardisation of tastes and a stereotyped offer. Arts and culture became either handy and low cost and an integrative part of the life of the average Western European citizen, or expensive, but subordinate to free market dynamics. The cultural operator has become used to the generous investments in culture and was puzzled when this providential financial support diminished. The cultural consumer had become “lazy” and spoiled, overwhelmed by the ever broad offer, as well as by the ever seductive leisure industry.

It was within this context that restrictive budget measures in the whole Western territory after the eighties, began to touch mainly the less established organisations, those which used to offer a higher degree of creativity and innovation in their practices and interaction with the public space, while the more legitimated, established ones, or the money making cultural industries still continued to be supported. We notice that, in the context of this rapid shift in orientation of public cultural policies (from a patron state to an enabling state), the traditional cultural organisations could not simply be competitive any longer, and that the domain was usurped by the cultural industries, tourism and the private sector, which had strongly developed in the meantime. The latter tended to occupy the space of cultural consumption more and more aggressively and to shape audience tastes accordingly. Culture became the intersection of paradoxes, but also of complementarities: as a field engendering huge social expectations, but also as commodity and leisure; as intrinsically dependent on exterior financial resources, as well as a booster of the extra-cultural sectors. Furthermore, the strong emerging pressure in the nineties, of the new technologies, the media and the communication revolution, globalisation and the unexpected geopolitical reordering, added a couple of crucial components to this.

This is the general background of Western cultural policies that Eastern Europe encountered between the 90's and year 2000, a context so tired by years of investing in access to culture and giving cultural equipment, unbalanced by the counter effects of technological and communication explosion, in search of ways to re launch and reinforce traditional cultural consumption, despite the proliferation of the over successful audiovisual and show business. And a context unprepared for the fact that the iron curtain practically disappeared overnight.

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<sup>6</sup> Myerscough, John, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1988), Matarasso, Francois, 1997, *“Use or ornament, the social impact of the arts”*, Comedia

## *The arrival of Eastern Europe*

The cultural challenges in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism are very different from the above. The state, as the unique investor in culture, was compelled to play a suspect and rather negative role in the initial phase of post communist transition. Therefore, the immediate measures in cultural policy in the whole of the former Eastern “block” included first and foremost the des-étatisation of the cultural infrastructure, without any real serious analysis being made of the long-term implications of such measures. The first impulse was to “give away” the state and do this in two ways; by delegating the cultural agenda to the regions and towns and by dismantling the traditional state subsidizing systems for culture as quickly as possible. Hence, in South East Europe, larger countries such as Romania tried with difficulty to implement new decentralisation policies<sup>7</sup>. The idea succeeded much better in smaller countries such as Slovenia, Croatia or Bulgaria (at least on the local level)<sup>8</sup>.

As far as privatisation is concerned, different legislative initiatives<sup>9</sup> tried to diversify and strengthen the private source of cultural support and to encourage privatisation, but while the cultural industries reaped the real benefits, traditional cultural institutions continued to survive only due to state financial support. The infrastructure and labour legislation in most of the South East European countries was not considered a priority on most government agendas. Even the social status of the artists and intellectuals, marginalized by the booming post communist wild capitalism, had to find refuge in the low, but secure when still existing, financial aid provided by the state.<sup>10</sup>

Trying to free itself from state dependency, state control came above all as the “compulsive” post communist response of the cultural communities to former administrative centralism. But the real challenge for the new societies was how to transform the broken social communist bonds into democratic interaction; what role could new cultural policies play in this process, to what extent and with which instruments? The difficulty lay more on the side of the people than on the side of the institutions, despite the fact that the institutions were an ideal nest of concealment, harbouring inertia and stagnation.

The first lesson to be learned was that, in order to achieve a liberated frame of mind, one should reinvent cultural civil society, rebuild trust and learn to accept the co-existence of different opinions inside the same professional community. A second matter was related to the re-appropriation of a sense of responsibility inside the cultural community; where should complaint stop and constructive criticism start and what are the values that cultural civil actors protect and promote? Thirdly, the question as to the power of the non-governmental sector vis-à-vis the public authorities and the legislature became apparent. In order to acknowledge this power, one had first to understand the role, functioning and constraints of the public authorities and of legislators, to abandon the childish idea that democracy and anarchy are one and to realise that democratic existence implies order and respect of democratic institutions. In a way, we might say that for the post-communist civil society in transformation, the re-linking of broken ties and the reinventing of a social dynamics of freedom, as the pre-condition of democracy,

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<sup>7</sup> The first decentralization measures were taken in the 90's, followed by re-centralization in the period 94-96. A serious decentralization policy started only in 2001, when follow up and better sustainability could be ensured (Nitulescu, [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org))

<sup>8</sup> See essays by Katunaric and Copic on [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org)

<sup>9</sup> See Varbanova, [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org)

<sup>10</sup> National cultural funds were launched in Central European countries, but also in Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Albania in the late 90's

was *the* main issue. And this could and should only happen at the grass roots level of cultural action, before it could reach the rest of the decision-making levels. In the specific South East European context these re-conversion tasks were even harder to achieve, because the region had to deal with war and the dismantling of a state (former Yugoslavia) or with the emergence of post totalitarian societies (as in Romania and Albania).

The task of the legislators and the public authorities in readapting their bureaucratic role was facilitated by Western mentors, (Council of Europe, Unesco, diverse Western cultural bureaucracies, cultural diplomacy agencies...). The problem, in their case, was how to integrate the right values that their posture was supposed to promote, how to act differently at the administrative level (the administrative challenge), how to shape and implement new policies in the old institutional infrastructures. At the cultural institution level this translated into questions related to the provision of functional changes (the managerial challenge), long term planning and pure organisational measures.

On the civil level cultural networks and cooperation projects were maybe the main learning mentor. Still, the responsibility of this level was far more important, because it was supposed to be the builder of social capital, of that “glue” that brings institutions together.<sup>11</sup> The challenge concerned not only the new values, but also the interaction in the broader cultural field, between memory and modernity, old and new, ideologically marked and free culture and how all this should be transmitted by individual and collective cultural action. The problem of multileveled competence (know-how) was stringent. Still, before competence could be tackled, strategic vision had to be developed and values had to be re appropriated.

The equal participation of the above-mentioned levels in the design and implementation processes of cultural policy seemed to provide a possible answer. And *Policies for culture* found, in this respect, the right moment to put this idea into practice.

### *Participative policymaking, a winning compromise for democratic governance in culture*

The notion of “participative policy making” is what we call in the broadest sense possible, an Anglo-American concept, theorised at the end of the eighties as one of the eleven characteristics of the “learning organisation”<sup>12</sup>. The concept had its advocates and critics, but time has proven that the notions inherent to the term (such as interdependent “stakeholders”, benefits of consultation and involvement, sharing responsibility in the policy and strategy forming processes [taking part, discussing and contributing]) are critical to issues like management of change, working with diversity, implementing change in a unstable environment. Hence, their relevance in the South East European context.

It is interesting to note that in an inquiry conducted by the EU in 2004, about the role of European representative organisations, “participative policy making” is used as one of the criteria in order to identify ways to improve the action and the impact of these organisations on the level of the civil sector.

Where cultural policies are concerned, countries in transition have the particular problem of re- installing participation. Hence, “participative policy making” is useful as long as it contributes added value and brings the missing quality to the design of new governance and is a catalyst for democratic procedures. The idea to engage with this concept was

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<sup>11</sup> Gould, Helen, in Mercer, Colin, 2001, pg 33

<sup>12</sup> Padler M., Burgoyne J. and Boydell J., 1988, “The learning organization”, Mc Graw Hill

born during the development phase of *Policies for Culture* in 1999 and what we observe today is that its major outcomes could be classified as follows:

1) *impact at local level*

Projects like the one in the city of Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Timisoara and Arad (Romania), Prilep in Macedonia, Prijedor in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the cities of Sombor, Uzice, Belgrade, Sabac and Kragujevac in Serbia, or Zagreb and Rijeka in Croatia<sup>13</sup> are witnessing the “establishment of sustainable cooperation platforms and real partnerships for an interactive, democratic and effective way of identifying and implementing feasible solutions for the development of culture at local level”. The relevance of participative cultural policy making at the local level is stressed even more when we observe, like in the case of the above mentioned Serb cities, that the “long term cooperation deal” between cultural NGO’s and the public authorities can be fragile and fall victim to political manipulations. Because the participants in this deal are conducting a pioneering effort, follow up actions are crucial.<sup>14</sup>

The local level has, of course, its advantages where participation is concerned, because it is in cities and departments that the lack of consensus and cohesion in decision-making has an immediate impact on the well being of the community. Smaller urban communities appeared to be more responsive to the challenge as they regained autonomy of action after years of centralism. This brought about positive dynamics of initiative and individualisation in places that had forgotten how to be themselves, hidden behind the common ideological curtain.

2) *invention of real and virtual public spaces of debate.*

The launching of on line PFC journals, bulletins and case studies, and the creation of a website have participated to a specific sharing of experience and information and have stimulated the expression of diverse opinions emerging from regional expertise. The publication of special dossiers on cultural policy within well-known cultural journals all over the region determined recognition of an emerging regional competence, but have also offered a public space for the confrontation of diverse ideas and proposals for further action.

3) *power of the civil sector*

A third important outcome is well exemplified by the Technology Park Culture concept (Sofia, Bulgaria), initiated by academics and bringing together university researchers, cultural operators, journalists and policy makers in a forum of interactive stakeholders, that has succeeded in imposing its legitimacy as a Cultural Forum and has become a reliable partner for the legislative level; on a different scale “Pac Multimedia” Debate Centre in Macedonia also achieved similar results in 2004. These projects spoke about a need for new roles and responsibilities that have to be not only formally, but also substantially redesigned by the players active in the cultural system, in partnership, so that implementation of policy measures is owned and shared by all actors concerned.

For South East Europe therefore, participative policymaking proves a good learning tool, capable to re launch the “cycle of responsibilities” and consequently, lead to further trust

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<sup>13</sup> [www.policiesforculture.org](http://www.policiesforculture.org)

<sup>14</sup> Quotes are taken from Radu’s and Dietachmair’s articles on action projects presented in this publication.

building. We believe that the notion of “culture” was revisited in an innovative manner, as a link, not as an object. This is what *Policies for Culture* endeavoured to prove and support through its vision and through its diversity of action lines. Cultural processes are the bearers of different sets of values and it is important today to give more generous space to these processes, precisely because there is deep confusion between free market values and democratic values, between ends and means. New democracies believe that once free market mechanisms are installed, democratic values will naturally emerge. This confusion drives fragile societies like the post communist ones to the idealisation of free market mechanisms and to the blind belief that democracy can be installed and implemented, instead of the understanding that democracy is a set of processes and a number of principles to be acquired and respected in time and in strong relation with an ethical stand point, while the market does not and cannot have “ethics”. That is why cultural policies have to prove, in a participative way, that there are other tools and instruments of democratic provision.

We can even observe today that this issue seems to be of a much broader European relevance (East and West, North and South). There are lessons to be learned from the South East European “laboratory” of participative cultural policy making, since the design of their new cultural policies is trying to reformulate fundamental questions. We have to consider maybe more attentively that what seemed so evident to the Western world fifty years ago is no longer so and eastern Europeans are maybe the ones now curious enough to risk finding new and original answers. And even more so those countries bordering Russia and the Balkan Peninsula.

This is why new European cultural policies, because of their global intervention in the public space and their impact on social bodies have to be determined according to this crucial awareness. European cultural policies are important as long as they can help the implementation of the democratic standards on a European scale and can set up the criteria of a new governance logic.

If we continue today to propagate exclusively the economic argument for culture, we fail to see that the real added value that European cultural policies can bring is related much more to the success of democracy, defined as a key to individual freedom and the welfare of the human being, more than to anything else.

To conclude, we believe that the questions that we have to ask ourselves in this respect at the grass root level, but also at the higher levels of decision making (on a European scale) should be:

- Why do we meet together in the cultural sector: because we want to or because we are told to? Are we more networkers of culture and promoters of values or just bureaucrats of culture and implementers of outlived stereotypes?
- Who elaborates today’s cultural policies? Most decision makers are the result of cold war “vision”, thus of a “broken link” that has not yet been restored despite the effort that has been made to restore it politically.
- Why do we not reinvest in the cultural policy debate, giving it a historical dimension, so that we can see better on a European scale what has changed in the context since this notion emerged and what has to be accordingly adapted? We have to relinquish the existing “additive”/quantitative kind of description of cultural policies, in favour of a more creative oriented and qualitative perception of the impact of cultural policy implementation, its scope on the long term, its coherence with sustainable development and, above all, with democratic values. We have also to respect the diversity of cultural policy models, as a guarantee to preserve cultural diversity itself. To stop mixing up ends and means.

In view of enlargement and the role of culture in the success of this process, we have therefore to regard the fall of communism as first and foremost a cultural break, not only an ideological one. In transition from a communist order to young capitalist societies, the so-called “new democracies” are, for the individuals in those societies, very similar to societies in cultural transition. This requires a reshaping of behaviour, living standards, how one views the other. To facilitate the transition and provide space for reconciliation, cultural policies could be irreplaceable mediators. The European project can only succeed, if this is correctly understood. We want to believe that the *Policies for Culture* programme is and will continue to be one of the many successful facilitators of this project.

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