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## THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION: SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE OF CIVIC CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS<sup>2</sup>

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### Summary

*This study is an attempt to research processes of development of culture of dissent in Southeast Europe, during transition period. Thus, in the focus of attention is last twenty years of art & cultural activism (realized within civil society movements through independent scene network) and evaluation of the extent of their contribution to the development of new social paradigms, raising critical awareness on nationalism, xenophobia, hatred speech permeating the official cultural scene in the 90s. This text is based on numerous empirical sociological and political research studies (Pavlović, Golubović, Lazić...) as well as cultural analysis (Dragičević Šešić, Stojković, Vujadinović...).*

*The research had shown that during this 20 years independent culture of dissent had gone through four stages of development. In the first stage – art activism, art groupings and individual actions under patronage of the Radio B 92 had just begun, creating numerous projects, in order to raise critical awareness of the population about war, media manipulation, patriarchal values, hatred speech. The second phase was enabled by the decision of Soros foundations to help creation of independent cultural spaces, used as platforms for expression for numerous dissident groups and individual artists. The third phase was devoted to the capacity of building independent scene, both by raising the organisational managerial and entrepreneurial skills and networking and intercultural competences as well. Strengthen independent*

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*artistic scene could in its fourth phase develop further activities of lobbying and advocacy, especially as they succeeded in creating national and regional networks based on collaborative practices, sense of solidarity and mutual aid.*

*This essay attempts to show to what extent this independent, activist culture was important in promoting ideas of open society, peace culture, collaborative practices, but also in promoting new ethical and esthetical ideas, especially using new media. Thus this culture of dissent contributed to critical thinking and critical reflection within artistic scene, advocating social justice, human rights and social changes through common regional cultural projects.*

### **Key words**

*art activism, culture of dissent, civil society, networking.*

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The 90s in Southeast Europe were the times of wars, dissolving values, rising of nationalism, loss of identity, disappearing of institutions, and of social self-destruction. The national euphoria, war and refugee flows, together with media manipulation, created the atmosphere in which capitalism was introduced without respectable discussion, whereas the socialist self-governing system was abandoned even in education and the cultural sphere (both lost their autonomies due to restrictive laws which re-etatized institutional systems, previously self-governed).

Consequently, the cultural institutions have been forced to reduce their art projects and critical programming activities (Janjić D. 1997). Self-censorship, as well as escapism as a policy, started to prevail in repertories polluted with nationalistic megalomania. The spaces of free expression (Students cultural centers) lost their importance and character. The wave of brain drain took the best and most energetic part of the youth. “The suppressed civil society, civil deficit” (Pavlović, V. 1995: 247), was the outcome of the traditionalism and authoritarianism, a collectivist orientation (Golubović Zagorka, 1999) as well as of pauperization and transitional (in)justice which annihilated the middle class and brought some new social elites (Lazić, Mladen 1998).

That was the moment when a slow development of civil society started, along with peace activism, independent media and humanitarian actions. Through different programs art and cultural “components” appeared as integral parts of civil society or independent media projects. Thus, the need for specific

strategies and specific approach in supporting arts activities was expressed, and art very soon became the most visible and symbolically very important part of civil society strategies in the region.

### **Art activism**

The Independent Scene brought together the aesthetical, ethical and intellectual positions, which challenged the worldviews officially imposed by the state and church: nationalism, xenophobia, patriarchal values, hatred speech (Dragičević Šešić, 1994), media manipulation with ethnic stereotypes, etc. Numerous initiatives: LED Art projects, Dah Theater devised performances<sup>3</sup>, research of group Absolutely Novi Sad, ŠKART group happenings, Magnet radical “media” performances... The number of “groups” is witnessing the need of individual artists to gather together in hostile surroundings, to fight isolation, to find synergy with others in the environment echoing with patriotic songs. Art and culture became an instrument for raising voice of civil society – voice of dissent.

The networking of these projects under the roof of Radio B92 strengthened and made visible the alternative scene (Dragičević Šešić, 1997). Through its numerous exhibitions, publications, concerts, music and video productions, Radio B 92 became very important actor in Belgrade cultural life, and thus introduced new “urban” culture in folklorized public space, dominated by turbo-folk or patriotic kitch. Although excluded from the world art scene, and deliberately self-excluded from Serbian official art scene, artists and cultural mediators tried to act, to provoke public opinion and to touch incidental audience. Similar processes have happened throughout the region, where artists also have been isolated, due to the war, newly introduced visa systems, hostility of neighboring countries, etc.

At the same time, although starting without Art & Culture program, Soros foundations all over the region recognized the importance of individual artists and artistic production for raising awareness and advocating necessity of social changes and intercultural dialogue.

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3 *This Babylonian turmoil*, according to B. Brecht, was the first antiwar performance on the streets of Belgrade. Till today, the performances of Dah theater are bravely going against the stream (*Female side of War, Memory for the Victims of Srebrenica Genocide*, etc.)

The political artistic performance was the only way for many of the artists to show their civil disobedience, to protest to the governmental policies and practices. Foundations realized that those were the strongest voices of dissent, which, if united and given better conditions for their activities, might strengthen the civil society movements and its expressions (Creative Europe, 2002: 143-148). Thus a need to create a space outside polarized political and institutional cultural scene – government vs. nationalistic opposition, became visible (Ćurgus Kazimir, Velimir, 2001), as many of those had happened in private spaces temporarily used as public spaces (thus the exhibition „Private – Public” was organized in a private villa of the artist Milica Tomić, where the artworks of foreign authors were exhibited out of private collections... due to the lack of space dedicated to art and critical debates in Belgrade in that particular moment.

### Independent centers – open cultural spaces

An important moment in development of civil society has been marked by creation of independent cultural centers. It was obvious that although a lot of initiatives and projects were implemented, a systemic and more important cultural change could not be achieved. The actors on Independent Scene felt isolated in their efforts of culture of dissent. To achieve deeper impact they started to look for permanent working spaces.

Metelkova (the first squat in abandoned caserns of Yugoslav Army in Ljubljana) initiated this process which in other ex-Yugoslav countries came later, when critical mass of projects, programs of artistic activism and civil society movements developed. Thus, in September 1994 the Rex – Cultural Center of Radio B92 was opened. Soon other centers joined: the Center for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade opened in 1995, Apostrophe in Novi Sad and Concordia in Vršac. Throughout the region similar initiatives existed, from Mala stanica in Skopje to Powder Mill in Osijek, Kibla in Maribor (July 1996), etc.

Those were parallel worlds – only free spaces of normality and openness which enabled gathering of creative personalities, free thinkers, but also re-establishment of regional cultural cooperation. Collaborative events promptly followed: *Living in Sarajevo* (May 1995), *Tuzla – Belgrade* (February 1996) and *Pertej*, exhibition of Kosovo artists in Belgrade (July 1997). Festival *AlterImage* (September 1996) was the key event in profiling of the role of independent centers. Although linked to Bitef Festival, it presented artists and

groups which had experimented and brought ethical issues in art projects – theater groups: Dah, Ogledalo, Mimart, Omen, Dodest (Podgorica) and artists-performers. The atmosphere was festive and celebratory, but also “reflective”, as it was a unique occasion for critical intelligentsia and for artists to get acknowledged with each other’s work, and for the initiation of more complex collaborative projects.

Independent institutions offered infrastructure and better conditions for production and presentation of art work in the second part of the 90s, for all of the independent radical arts groups. Thus the rhythm of artistic actions, creation and concepts development has been established together with theoretical scene (reviews *Transkatalog*, *Pro Femina*, *Reč* etc.), both deeply connected with political groupings such as the Belgrade Circle, Women-in-Black, later Resistance (Otpor) etc. In this way, the synergy of operation, but also mutual exchange of thoughts and ideas, had enriched activities and enable more complex and strong projects.

Ethics and specific sense of the place characterized all independent organizations acting as platforms for artistic projects. Those were spaces with a clear political and cultural position. Even programs in Rex – open to the youngest audience – from comics to rock, sales of fanzines to media-opera, were in their essence a political debate on current reality. Multiple platforms for cultural creativity and debate flourished in the region, from Rex and CZKD, to Točka, Multimedija in Skopje, Lamparna in Labin, MaMa and Center for Drama Arts in Zagreb, Pekarna and Kibla in Maribor and later CK 13 in Novi Sad, Abrašević in Mostar... But, in a repressive everyday situation where independent centers have been permanently under pressure, alternative art scene entered the free space of World Wide Web long before public cultural institutions and art schools. Ljudmila (Ljubljana Digital Media Laboratory), CyberRex in Belgrade, SCCA in Skopje, Lamparna in Labin and later MaMa, Multimedia Institute in Zagreb, had a goal to introduce to artists and audiences new media culture, Internet and digital arts, but also “socially inflected approaches to new technologies” – such as open sources, free software, etc.

Thus, the virtual sphere was conquered and created new free space for independent critical thinking and innovative artistic creation. Web was used to foster further regional collaborative practices and created a tool for socio-political actions, linking social movements and radical artistic practices. This new virtual space gatherings enabled that a widespread sense of isolation was beaten and new communications channels and platforms developed.

## Capacity building and collaborative decentralization

The third phase of civil society strategy was focusing on raising the capacities for achieving sustainability. Emphasis was put on capacity building in management and marketing, project making and fundraising. The first seminar of the kind was organized in Belgrade for all Soros art and culture coordinators and managers of SCCAs from Estonia to Mongolia, from Russia to Albania. The seminar has shown how regional know-how<sup>4</sup> together with western knowledge should be used, as cultural management in transitional countries, linked (or opposed) to public policies, community traditions and values, demands specific approach in implementing changes and introducing new standards, such as logic of strategic planning, evaluation, fundraising ...

Numerous other trainings had followed, but also few long term capacity building programs such as *Kultura nova*<sup>5</sup> – which regrouped Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Macedonian foundation together with European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam. This was a new form in developing a joint program targeting NGOs who already had achieved a lot regarding art production, dissemination and community work – but who lack knowledge necessary for further development and sustainability.

This demanding three year action program where pro-active, peer and practice-based learning was the core methodology, stimulated NGOs to produce strategic analysis and concrete long term strategic plans, what helped them in acquiring complex skills and knowledge. That enabled them to become later key factors in development of both civil society and policy making, locally and regionally<sup>6</sup>.

Those “horizontal exchanges” developed cultural needs and reinforced local capacities, so a number of open clubs and NGOs had been created to fight isolation of local actors and feeling of helplessness...as well as projects like E-761 (Academica 2008) or Flux<sup>7</sup> as real collaborative projects bringing arts and artists in socially deprived neighborhoods. Thus, networking (national,

4 Teaching cultural management started at Belgrade Faculty of Drama Arts in 1961.

5 <http://ec.europa.eu/culture/key-documents/doc/ericarts/annex05/Case21InformalArtistsNGONetworks.pdf>

6 Thus MaMa initiated creation of Clubture (2002) regrouping more than 30 independent organizations in Croatia to exchange programs. Networking helped also in spreading managerial knowledge and skills, fostering entrepreneurialism and enabling self-sustainability of network members (<http://www.clubture.org>).

7 <http://rexold.b92.net/fluxokonas/> accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

regional and European) became an essential strategy of development, and first public debates started to be organized around it since 1999 (Stojković, 1999).

### **Agenda setting: policy, advocacy and lobbying**

Advocacy, lobbying and pro-active approach in policy-making became daily “job” of cultural organizations enlarging their mission toward urbanism, social inclusion, education. **MaMa** was also in the heart of those processes, enlarging and fostering further those capacities in the whole Southeast Europe linking with new generations of independent cultural organizations in the region, such as **Walking Theory** in Belgrade (promoting principles of self-organization and self-learning). The movement *Right to the city*, fighting against neoliberal destruction of public spaces and for community-based approach in planning and policy development, although not always having success (“Varšavska street” action<sup>8</sup>), had shown that civil society became not only an equal, but a leading partner in policy discussions, raising awareness and creating agenda in cultural policy spheres.

Special focus was going towards the support to mobility, as it became also European agenda in 2007, but without any cultural policy instruments in the Balkans. Thus independent organisations started developing their own instruments to promote mobility (Vujadinovic, Dimitrije, 2009).

**Multimedia** in Skopje organized numerous regional research projects, trainings and conferences, spreading know-how and energy among public actors of cultural policies, local cultural institutions (libraries, museums and cultural centers) and independent organizations (a coalition of NGOs in Macedonia). Multimedia acted in peripheral areas, outside of capital cities, connecting western Macedonian and Kosovo cities with the rest of the region (due to language barrier, cultural actors had often been excluded from collaborative programs). Similar were processes launched by Kuda.org in Novi Sad where coalition *For new cultural policies*<sup>9</sup> had been created (July 2009) opposing official city cultural policy focusing on creative industries and cultural consumption (popular festival practices). The major achievement in this area came in June 2010: A first meeting of a Coalition of associations and initiatives of independent cultural scene of Serbia. The Coalition regrouped

8 <http://www.nedamovarsavsku.net/> accessed 24<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

9 <http://www.zakulturnepolitike.net/> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2013

hundreds of actors of independent scene. This moment<sup>10</sup> was a benchmark of a new relations – of “shared policies” and a good sign of achieved capacities of independent sector who became equal partner in influencing and designing cultural policies and strategies, even has a strength and knowledge to foster European integration processes. Finally, together with Croatian Clubture network, all those independent organizations and associations in the region established Kooperativa, the regional network<sup>11</sup> whose first inaugural meeting was held in July 2012, in Zagreb.

Thus, all of those actions confirm the statements of Branimir Stojković (2002) that civil society organizations are the real actors not only in the cultural, but in the cultural policy field. This would demand more knowledge, stability and long-term actions, more planning and structuring, which is difficult to balance with the principle of voluntariat (free commitment). However, the independent scene in the Southeast Europe succeeded in finding equilibrium among the principle of „good organisation” necessary for „impact”, evaluation and assessment, and principle of improvisation, quick reaction and project logic, more adequate to the artistic needs and artistic expressions of its members.

## Conclusion

During the past twenty years, art and culture had an important role in bringing peace culture, ideas of open inclusive society in the countries of Western Balkans preoccupied with nation building process. The Culture of dissent which had developed during the 90s, created its own organizations, institutions, media, formal and informal channels of art distribution and idea debates. This culture which emphasized the right to independent and critical thinking in the moments when the “national unity” and patriotism without doubts were the norms, was at the same time a link among free individuals and groups, a link of the present with past (with “forgotten”, revolutionary, or “dissonant” past), a link among the divided ethnic groups and a link with Europe and European values.

10 <http://www.nezavisnakultura.net/index.php/sr-YU/o-nkss/misija-i-ciljevi>, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

11 <http://www.clubture.org/organizacija/rad-skupstine/zapisnici-sjednica/> accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2013.

Thus, civil society cultural strategies went through several phases: the first one has been spontaneously “defined”, through individual and group projects, innovative in their forms and methods of producing and distributing (research-based or community-based projects, site-specific, etc.)

From there a need to have “foci” for joint actions developed – so, the second phase brought independent platforms and centers for mutual action thus fostering civil society groups creative capacities, enabling audience gatherings and opening social debate. Those centers had connected mutually, entered into dialogue and collaborative projects, and created wide networks of open clubs, creative individuals and projects throughout the region.

Then, the third phase demanded new knowledge and skills to all those activists artists now becoming managers and project leaders. That imposed changes in the strategies, reinforced also by the fact that in many of the cities and countries democratic governance replaced the previous authoritarian system. Civil society support to the improvement of public governance aiming towards the achievement of systemic changes within democratized (although never completely democratic) cultural policies, became one of the major strategic pillars. But, networks of independent cultural centers and open clubs, those new agents of cultural development throughout the region, demanded focus on raising their capacities in management and marketing to become sustainable. Achieved sustainability of independent cultural sector enabled them to develop complex interdisciplinary and transborder projects, to enter the European integration processes as the leading partners from the region.

Thus, the present phase saw the focus in developing civil society capacities in cultural policy making, advocacy and lobbying, achieving in that way more of systemic changes in the societies still in a transitional turmoil, still obsessed with identity politics and national territorial issues... The independent centers, organizations and networks today are actively collaborating in creating important art projects, but also in designing and evaluating cultural policies. Foci of creativity and critical reasoning, still today they are crucial for the raising of controversial issues (such as genocide in Srebrenica<sup>12</sup>), bringing the policy topics on public agenda (against neoliberal pressures on cultural

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12 11<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Dah theater, group Škart and Women in Black has realized, as they do every year, a public performance on the Square of Republic, honouring victims of Srebrenica genocide, thus contributing to collective memory on the issue which official politics of memory wants to erase.

policy) or for the development of a new generation of artist-activist, groups and movements.

This culture of dissent, the radical arts and critical intellectual platforms, opened up new areas in cultural sphere and contributed to important systemic social changes in the societies destroyed with war, media war, nationalistic manipulations, economic transition... The independent cultural sector has become a real agent of changes within a dynamic, open and "involved" artistic scene, actively participating in the regional cultural processes.

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## ULOGA KULTURE U DEMOKRATSKOJ TRANZICIJI: NASTANAK KULTURNIH I UMETNIČKIH ORGANIZACIJA U OKVIRU INICIJATIVA CIVILNOG DRUŠTVA SRBIJE I JUGOISTOČNE EVROPE

### Apstrakt

Ovaj esej bavi se istraživanjem uloge organizacija civilnog društva u procesima tranzicije u kulturi, od devedesetih godina do danas. Istraživanje je pokazalo da se ovih dvadeset godina mogu podeliti u četiri faze u odnosu na sadržaje i modalitete organizovanja i delovanja u nezavisnom sektoru. Prva faza – umetnički aktivizam, bila je obeležena delovanjem pojedinaca i posebno umetničkih grupa pod pokroviteljstvom Radija B 92, posebno u okviru programa Urbazona, kojom su dovodene u pitanje ratne politike, nacionalizam, govor mržnje, ksenofobija. Tada nastaju Škart, Led art, Dah teatar, Mimart, Magnet... Drugu fazu obeležava nastanak i razvoj nezavisnih kulturnih centara (Metelkova, REX, CZKD...) kao platformi oko kojih će se okupljati umetnici, medijski aktivisti i aktivisti civilnog društva, razvijajući kompleksnije umetničke projekte pa čak i festivale (AlterImage). Treću fazu, nakon demokratskih promena u najvećem broju zemalja Jugoistočne Evrope karakteriše rad na jačanju kapaciteta i međusobnoj podršci kroz decentralizaciju aktivnosti, da bi četvrta faza, koja traje i danas, fokus stavila na akcije umrežavanja u cilju lobiranja i zagovaranja.

Ukratko, ovaj esej pokazuje koliko je nezavisna, aktivistička kultura bila važna u promovisanju ideja otvorenog društva, mirovne kulture, saradnje, kritičkog mišljenja, i koliko su važni rezultati i trajni uticaj koji je ostvaren u celokupnom području kulture. Tako je ova kultura otpora, neslaganja, doprinela stvaranju kritičkih intelektualnih platformi u kojima se zagovaraju duboke društvene promene, bori za ljudska prava i društvenu pravdu, pre svega zajedničkim, regionalnim delovanjem čime je bitno uticala na ponovno uspostavljanje regionalnih kulturnih procesa.

### Ključne reči

umetnički aktivizam, kultura otpora, civilno društvo, umrežavanje