

A Cultural Policy Viewpoint

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Introduction

Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007 was by far the greatest achievement in our new history. As someone who has worked hard to position Bulgaria as an active new EU member in the field of culture, I would approach this discussion from the viewpoint of cultural policy. Because cultural policies have been since the last century the area where governments, federal states and cities developed regulations and subsidised arts and culture in various ways, in order to ensure their existence, new creation, and the future transmission of cultural values.

In the EU pre-accession and accession stage culture was never a central topic. This is so, because culture is a "subsidiary" policy of the EU (according to art. 167, TFEU) this means that it is not a "common policy" (such as the internal market, common security and defence or common agricultural policy etc.).¹ Cultural and education policies remain decided at national level, for which no substantial harmonisation is required. Nevertheless, for media & audio-visual, as well as for copyrights there are EU directives setting standards and regulating the respective markets.²

I am going to touch upon three cultural policy areas that seem topical in the context of Bulgarian EU membership, and in the context of today's conversation: 1) Cultural heritage - central in the BG Presidency programme in 2018; 2) International cultural cooperation with EU support and 3) Increasing role of cities in the Bulgarian cultural landscape.

A little background information on Bulgarian cultural policy would be needed to observe the progress and the challenges along the way. In the course of Bulgaria's transition to democratic governance and a functioning market economy, a series of cultural reforms have been envisaged and conducted since 1990s, with the key objective to prepare the sector and the institutions for the future accession. Main objectives (as well as values) then were:

- guaranteed freedom of expression;
- creation of conditions for equal participation in cultural life;
- preservation and promotion of the culture of different ethnic and religious minorities;
- support for cultural education; and
- support for international cultural exchange and intercultural communication.

The *Protection and Development of Culture Act* (1999)³ defines culture as: "the activity associated with the creation, study, dissemination and protection of cultural values, as well as the results of this activity". The definition applies to culture in the narrow sense and is to serve cultural institutions, the arts and activities associated with them. Culture in its broader sense, related to humans and human development, is larger, relates to quality of life.

Reforms were carried out to decentralize administrative and financial responsibilities for culture towards cities & municipalities; to develop market-oriented behaviour cultural institutions and artists; to develop cultural legislation for meeting the new socio-economic challenges; to harmonize

¹ [Art. 167 of Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union](#) (Lisbon Treaty);

² [Audiovisual and Media Services Directive \(AVMSD\)](#) in the context of digital single market;

³ Закон за закрила и развитие на културата (<https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134664704>)

with EU legislation (in the aforementioned areas); to strengthen the role of non-governmental sector etc. In the transition period **culture was considered to be a propellant of democratisation and a pillar of civil society**.⁴ Working steadily to achieve these objectives, with a lot of external support and expertise (mainly from the Council of Europe), has lead our cultural policies towards Europe.

Similar to all other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the role of the state decreased, private sector emerged, public infrastructure declined, new market conditions overruled the values of access to culture for all (public cinemas, bookshops closed, theatre productions diminished boosting unemployment etc.) On the other hand, removing physical and mental borders, opened up opportunities for international exchanges, changed mindsets, unlocked free expression (no censorship, but also no funding).

The EU membership added value for culture has a symbolic, but also a financial aspect. Enjoying the EU citizenship rights allows many to travel freely, to cooperate, to apply for EU funds also at national level etc. but most of all – enables Bulgarians to be part of EU decision making. EU funding increased, specifically for cultural infrastructure (reconstruction of buildings, restoration and conservation of cultural heritage, access to archaeological sites, fostering local tourism, digitisation etc.).

The European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 – an opportunity for all

The aim of the [European Year of Cultural Heritage](#) is to encourage more people to discover and engage with Europe's cultural heritage, and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space. The slogan for the year is: “Our heritage: where the past meets the future.” The aspirations of the sector are to achieve a central place for culture and cultural heritage in EU strategies and instruments at the end of this year and for the coming years. All EU Member states have programmed activities throughout the year, dedicated to tangible, intangible, natural and digital heritage.

The [Bulgarian Presidency of the EU](#) in 2018 has embraced this topic and will propose EU Council conclusions focusing on fostering cultural heritage in the EU policies, that would result in specific actions for consolidating cultural heritage as a factor in extending intercultural dialogue, bringing societies closer, promoting tolerance, as well as using it as a resource for sustainable development.⁵ A research conference in Plovdiv “Conference - cultural heritage for a more sustainable Europe” in March 2018 will gather research findings, expertise and best practices to support it.

Bulgaria has assumed a key role in the regional cooperation in South East Europe (in particular Western Balkans), as mediator of key EU values, experiences, knowledge, practices in the field of culture and cultural heritage (among others). Common cultural heritage of the Balkans cannot be limited in national borders. A number of attempts in the recent past mobilised regional cooperation in cultural heritage – using intergovernmental formats such as UNESCO, Council of Europe programmes, e.g. Cultural Routes in SEE, as well as the Council of Ministers of Culture of SEE.

For example, the Council of Ministers of Culture of South-East Europe (an initiative launched around 2005 adopted a number of political declarations and commitments for fostering regional cultural heritage, the latest of which in 2016, on cultural heritage protection, to enhance implementation of the 2014 Ohrid Regional Strategy for Culture, and to foster culture as a driving force for dialogue,

⁴ Bulgarian Cultural Policy profile at Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe (<http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/bulgaria.php?aid=21>)

⁵ Programme of the Presidency (<https://eu2018bg.bg/en/programme>)

good neighbourship, social cohesion and integration of the region.⁶ Bulgaria has been very active in this format and was the first in the region that involved the European Commission, UNESCO and CoE altogether in this process (back in 2006-2007). This initiative (among others) was a phase of our “emancipation” from being a beneficiary of international technical assistance and funding, to becoming a factor and initiator of regional cooperation, a catalyst of political action in culture in SEE. Today, such experiences, along with our role as a stability factor in the Balkans (since early 1990s), are instrumental in EU neighbourhood policies.

Critical remarks: Bulgaria’s abundant cultural heritage is among our most important and acknowledged assets and needs constant investments and promotion. Yet at national level, the protection, conservation and promotion of cultural heritage is a problematic area in the national legal framework, where the implementation of national and local (municipal) competences are not always working in favour of cultural heritage protection and sustainable development.⁷ Private ownership on cultural monuments creates problems for protection but in the Bulgarian legislation there are mostly sanctions (fines) for the owners, and no incentives or financial support for protection of their heritage. As a result, a number of classified buildings private ownership end up destroyed to open space for new investments, and others are being restored against the professional conventions and aesthetics.

There is no strategic approach at national level, but a lot of private and political interests – mainly for boosting tourism. Tourism (incl. cultural) has incontestable advantages to be leading in countries like Bulgaria, hence the current attempts still tend to neglect the negative external effects of tourism on authenticity and environment.

Examples: *Ancient City of Nessebar* (classified as Museum town, and World Heritage) is a tourism attraction at the Black sea coast, where the local economy took over the archaeological site and subdued it to its’ own rules. In 2010 the Nessebar municipality even made a plea to exclude Nessebar from the World Heritage list (!) to use also the historic part of the town for commerce. The case of *Pirin Nature park* (also World Heritage) is comparable, because both cases use as key argument, the economic growth and jobs in the area.⁸

On the other hand, there is an increasing public and professional awareness of the “socialist” heritage – architecture and monuments in public space. A department of the National Gallery of Fine Arts has opened as a Museum of socialist heritage, collecting and exhibiting artefacts from the period 1944 – 1989. As opposed to the highly politicized attitude to this heritage in the 1990s, today there are attempts to preserve these monuments, as an incontestable phase of Bulgarian history, and to develop tourism around them. In Sofia there exist a guided tour around the socialist monuments. The long and fierce debates before and during demolishing of the monument of *1300 Years of Bulgarian Statehood* by the Sofia municipality in 2017, have shown great engagement by both protagonists and antagonists, and in fact for the first time revealed the entire story of the monument to the larger public.⁹ This case deserves a place in the textbooks on *dissonant heritage*¹⁰. So do other Bulgarian

⁶ http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/council_of_ministers_of_south_east_europe_adopts/

⁷ Examples from [experts debate](#) on the current issues and trends in cultural heritage protection and restoration in Bulgaria, hosted by Institut Francais in Sofia, December 2016.

⁸ Nessebar <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/217> ; Pirin <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/225/gallery/>

⁹ The monument, which started dilapidating soon after its inauguration in 1981, has never been really accepted by the citizens, but was considered by art historians an important example of ‘brutalist’ architecture of this period.

examples, such as the famous *Buzludzha monument* (described as landed flying saucer) which became lately a popular destination for international young back-packer tourists in Bulgaria. This monument is among Europa Nostra's nominations for the [Seven Most Endangered](#) contest in 2018, which would increase the awareness and would possibly catalyze its restoration and conservation.

Bulgarian arts and culture in the international/European cultural cooperation landscape

Bulgarian Presidency (Culture) has committed to work on the development of an integrated, detailed and step-by-step strategic EU approach to international cultural relations through the creation of a road map – a key step.

International cultural cooperation is a term defined and set in stone in 1966 by UNESCO in its **Declaration of Principles in the International Cultural Co-operation**, among which “to spread knowledge, stimulate talent and enrich cultures; to develop peaceful relations and friendship among the peoples and bring about a better understanding of each other's way of life, to raise the level of the spiritual and material life of man in all parts of the world”.¹¹ In support to that comes the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), which sets also the role of cultural policies and engagement of all stakeholders in the promotion of diversity. EU has set out its role in this by becoming a party of the Diversity Convention, aside to its Member states, and by embedding its values in its key programmes and documents. Creative Europe programme (former Culture & Media programmes). It also adopted Communication on the state aid for audiovisual¹²

Creative Europe Programme – Culture & MEDIA

Bulgaria has become a party in the former EU programme Culture in 2001 and MEDIA programme in 2000.¹³ Successful trends are related to the programme strand *Literary Translations* as well as the steady support from MEDIA programme in the areas of “Support to Festivals”, “Promotion”, “Distribution”, as well as “Training” and “Development/Co-productions”.

Examples: Since a decade, Bulgarian publishing houses have been steadily in the top 5, and lately in top 3 (2016 – second) among all EU members in awarded grants in Creative Europe/Culture programme category *Literary translations* (also with relatively high success rate from all the applications). This is mostly due to the private drive in this sector. (Publishing and press have been among the most dynamic ones in the national cultural industries).

Media programme support has had an important structural effect on Bulgarian film industry, combined with the subsidies of the National Film Fund support. The fact that Media programme had covered the entire value chain from production, distribution, exhibition of films, promotion/film festivals, as well as creating the conditions for new international co-productions to emerge. (Bulgarian organisations have received from MEDIA in 2004-2013 as direct support more than 5.4 million EUR)¹⁴.

¹⁰ The concept of *dissonant heritage* is introduced by Tunbridge and Ashworth to address the conflicting nature of heritage, when different actors attribute contested meanings and values to the past (Tunbridge & Ashworth 1996).

¹¹ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13147&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

¹² [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52013XC1115\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52013XC1115(01))

¹³ Then known as “Culture 2000” and Media II – predecessors of today's Creative Europe framework programme (including “Culture” & MEDIA sub-programmes)

¹⁴ Source <http://www.mediadesk.bg/index.php?cat=content&page=24>

Example: Among most impactful cultural events in the last 20+ years have been the International Sofia Film Festival which fostered national (as well as regional) film co-production and promotion.

Sofia Meetings – within the festival is a market place where projects and scripts meet their future producers or co-producers. (Sofia Meetings receives between 60 – 75,000 EUR per year from MEDIA “Promotion”). The film “**Ága**” by Bulgarian film director Milko Lazarov will close the official main programme of Berlinale - Berlin International Film Festival 2018 (the first Bulgarian film in the Berlinale’s official selection in the last 29 years). The script has been presented at Sofia Meetings in 2014, where it made the contact with its French co-producers.

Sofia – City of Cinema - Sofia received the UNESCO Creative City of Cinema title in 2014, as a result of the well monitored and studied positive 8-year dynamics (2008-2015) in terms of gross value added, increased of the organisations involved, increase of employees and share of the foreign direct investment.¹⁵ This title shed light on the hard facts that cinema industry is not only “consuming” but also contributing to the economy.

What remains a problematic area is the insufficient distribution & display of Bulgarian and European films both nationally and internationally. Private ownership of the distribution chains remains decisive, hence the Media subsidy for distribution and display is important, but not enough.

On the other hand, the in Creative Europe Cooperation projects Bulgarian cultural organisations have not been as successful. We could rarely see more than one awarded Creative Europe grant with Bulgarian leading cultural organisation. This is due to the high requirements of co-financing and demonstration of financial and human resources capacity of the applicant organisations. Hence, Bulgarian cultural sector (both public and independent) could rarely be leading a Creative Europe projects, but rather partner. Unlike the film industry, cultural cooperation projects also do not have strong national co-financing instrument (subsidies, funds).

There are a few important ingredients for the internationalization of cultural production and dissemination to happen: intensified international mobility of artists & cultural workers (for work & studies); enabling “infrastructure” for collaboration projects to happen – residencies, artist exchanges, showcasing & co-productions – provided by networks, venues, institutions; support for production/co-production, distribution and promotion of cultural production. Bulgarian cultural sector lacks most of these, and the key national institutions such as Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers very sporadically opportunities.

Overall, the not-for-profit cultural sector remains unstable, under-financed, featured by daily struggle. **Brain drain** is substantial in the areas of arts and culture. There is no European subsidy that could replace the lack of conditions at national level for the cultural operators to work and thrive. Cultural supply & infrastructure is concentrated in a few big cities only.

Some recent developments in Bulgarian politics today tend to overshadow the positive trends and developments and undermine the original values and objectives which lead Bulgarian society towards our full EU membership:

- Insufficient political will to develop sound cultural policies and strategies, due to (unfortunately) lack of expertise; Cultural policymaking became more economic-driven, not value-driven, resulting in miss-match of expectations, goals and measurements/KPIs for

¹⁵ Statistics from the research „Sofia - city of creative economy. Economic contribution of arts, cultural and creative industries and cultural tourism“ by the Observatory of Cultural Economics (2017).

culture (incl. heritage etc.) This has had devastating effects on cultural supply and access in medium and small cities and towns;

- Threatened freedom of media and freedom of expression (ranked 109 in the 2017 World Press Freedom index)¹⁶
- Cultural NGOs & associations are still dependent largely on international funding, and very little on national. (lately also the public image of NGOs and civil society has been stigmatised by political and media discourses as opposed to the trends set forth in 1990s where strong civil society was a criteria for a developed democratic system);
- We observe some euro-sceptic populist voices in the current political realm which seem to reach out younger generations;

There are multiple pathways to improve in these areas, and I believe that our cultural sectors, our governance, as well as our citizens, do have the capacity to overcome them.

Increasing role of cities

Besides the strong example of the capital city – Sofia, Bulgarian cities are in line with some of the European trends on recognising more and more the importance of culture for their development. A catalyst for some of these trends was the national contest for European Capital of Culture 2019 won by Plovdiv (involved 8 candidate cities). It has been widely acknowledged that cities that made the effort to develop their strategies for cultural development and the “bid-books”(candidatures) have moved to the next level of their cultural policy development. Most of them (as well as all over Europe) decide to implement their strategies and to invest in culture. (e.g. Gabrovo, Varna, Burgas).

Cities are the new playgrounds for arts, culture and creative industries, where their impact can be really seen. Cities in EU have gathered enormous knowledge on how culture and the creative industries contribute to local economic development and urban regeneration, how cultural heritage can become a driver for economic growth and social inclusion at local level, and how culture could contribute to social inclusion, social innovation and intercultural dialogue.¹⁷ Besides this recent mapping with 71 case studies from European cities where only Sofia is featured, the EC has launched in 2017 its first Cultural and Creative Cities Monitor – yet another evidence about the increasing (it tackled also smaller cities, such as Gabrovo).

To conclude:

Since 2007 Bulgarian cultural policies and measures have tried to align with important trends in Europe. Film industry and Publishing are among the most dynamic sectors. Cultural Heritage’s importance is increasing – unlocking new opportunities for local cultural tourism. Bulgarian cultural producers have internationalised, mainly thanks to the larger share of international funds (including EU) and less on national subsidies. Without international support and partnerships, Bulgarian cultural sector could rarely promote its achievements to the world.

Investing in international cultural relations by engaging more stakeholders, including funding bodies, to create enabling environment/frameworks for cooperation, exchanges, mobility, intercultural

¹⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>; The criteria evaluated in the questionnaire are pluralism, media independence, media environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, and the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information. Methodology is available online.

¹⁷ Culture for Cities and Regions is a mapping at EU level based on 70 case studies : <http://www.cultureforcitiesandregions.eu/> .

learning beyond the EU to happen. The upcoming roadmap on the Strategic approach for international cultural relations of the EU shall definitely unlock new potentials, and hopefully would result in new instruments for global cultural collaborations (including the cultural and creative industries).

Let's not forget the words of EU Council President, Donal Tusk that EU membership was not granted to us, the Bulgarians, but it was well deserved (after long hard work and hardship). The BG Presidency is a wonderful opportunity for us to unite our forces – at national, international but also at local level. Culture shall not be politicised, politics bring division instead of unification. And it has been proven through practice, that if you build a culture of trust in expertise and knowledge, if cultural governance engages as many stakeholders in the common cause of cultural heritage and cultural policy development, then the engines would work at full speed toward the goals.

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