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## LACK OF AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CULTURAL ACTIVISM

*Abstract:* The lack of cultural activities of good quality from the beginning of the transition in Macedonia began to permeate with the appearance of formally or informally registered associations of citizens, active in the field of culture, aiming at creating constructive systems of values. The values they created, have educated several generations of young people raised in the period of transition of society, but they failed to win their place in the newly created market society. Today, when Macedonia attempts to officially put an end to the transition period, it seems that the neoliberal policies trampled over the civil initiatives in the area of culture and left no room to fill the cultural needs of all civil groups.

*Key words:* culture, cultural activism, cultural policy.

In 1992 I joined an amateur theatre company called “Metalija”<sup>1</sup> which rehearsed in the “Dom na Gradezhni Rabotnici” in the center of Skopje. At the time, I was eighteen years of age and had just finished high school. That year, 1992, was the last year of Metalija’s existence. We prepared a play, directed by the professional director Mite Grozdanovski, went with it on different stages several times and that was it. The nice memories of our time together remained, as well as the feeling that I did something creative and useful, while most of my peers spent their free time in cafes and bars, drinking alcohol or pointlessly “roaming” the Skopje streets. The next few years I witnessed, and sometimes participated in multiple attempts of youth cultural organization which either failed immediately or dissolved after a brief period of functioning. Initiatives did exist, but, in a transitioning country like Macedonia, it seemed that any attempt of cultural activism was doomed to failure because the activities in the field of culture did not provide for any financial profitability. In an environment which discouraged the implementation of any unprofitable activities in the area of culture, only a few people remained faithful to the idea and persisted in their efforts for cultural development. Some cultural activities got a new hope by the end of the 1990s, when the civil sector started to develop more rapidly with finances from international sources.

Near the end of the 1990s, as a result of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war between the FR Yugoslavia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), many international foundations and organizations started their activities in Macedonia. The pres-

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1 The name Metalija is a tasteless amalgamation of two names, the name of Thalia, and the name of the “Metalski Zavod – Tito”, a Macedonian industrial giant from the period of socialism, that dissolved in the period of transition that began at the beginning of the 1990s. “Metalski Zavod – Tito” used to sponsor the theatre company “Talija” and therefore somebody thought that they would honor the sponsor’s contribution by adding its name in the name of the theatre company, thus obtaining the amalgamation “MeTalija”.

ence of these organizations intensified the appearance of numerous local civil associations dealing with issues of interest for the local communities, a process which the Open Society Institute – Macedonia<sup>2</sup>, initiated a few years before. Within the multitude of civil associations dealing with all sorts of activities, including activities in the area of culture, there were a few exceptional associations which, considering their good quality work, served as an example and a stimulus for new forms of cultural organization which filled in the gaps in the cultural and social life of the country, as well as the efforts for cultural affirmation of Macedonia. Until 2003, the civil associations that implemented activities in the area of culture had access to many funds which flowed into Macedonia from international sources. However, as they came, these organizations started leaving, especially after the pacifying of the humanitarian crisis and the “stabilization” of Kosovo, and this led to the reduction of the financial support to the civil associations which, for the past twenty years unsuccessfully try to attract the attention of the main cultural policy makers in Macedonia. All international organizations justified their withdrawals from the country with the opening of new outlooks for Macedonia through the European Union Instruments for Pre Accession (also known as IPA funds), but it turned out that the state administrative institutions, as well as most of civil associations do not have the capacity and sufficient maturity to use the money available through these funds.

The period after 2001 was especially interesting for cultural activism. This period featured a large diversity of unprofitable cultural activities in Skopje. Primarily young people created these activities as a consequence of their revolt against the passivity of the budget institutions in the area of culture, the opportunism of some of the more established civil associations, the indifference of the policy makers towards the cultural need of the young people. These included individuals, informal groups and civil associations which, dissatisfied with the existing daily routine and reality stuck in the transition process, used their enthusiasm and belief in higher goals and tried to open the doors to the “world”, to create a space for free communication and cooperation among all people with creative ideas in Skopje, in Macedonia and throughout the world. The interest of the audience, comprising mostly their peers suggested that these activities were not pointless and in vain. This audience included individuals and groups that followed the example of their peers and created new forms of cultural action.

## Examples of culture activism

*Art forum.* My favorite example, which I suggest first whenever I want to emphasize the contribution to cultural activism in Skopje and Macedonia, is the Civil Association “Art Forum”. When I met them, through a joint project from 2002, I was amazed by their approach to the work with children and young people without parental care and children and young people in social and correctional facilities, using theatre techniques. I thought, and during my further cooperation with them I was convinced that their work required huge enthusiasm and massive quantities of energy and patience. Indeed, Art Forum participated in many activities that could not handle the challenge of such an approach, especially having in mind that they did not receive any reward for the enthusi-

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2 Later it was renamed into Foundation Open Society Institute – Macedonia.

asm they invested. Part of the results of the activities implemented by Art Forum include: reduction of violence among the protégés of children homes and stimulating their interest for additional education and changing the approach, when working with the children, of the staff, some of which had excessively strict and hardcore standpoints. According to the testimonies of part of the children and young people that participated in the activities of Art Forum, as well as from personal experience gained through active observation, the theatre skills had an invaluable meaning for the building of the soft skills of the participants, but also caused broader positive structural changes in the relations between the protégés in the children homes as well as the relation between the staff and their wards. Precisely when Art Forum could really boast with visible results and when it managed to strengthen its human capacities with moderators on workshops originating from the target group themselves, who knew best the circumstances in the children homes, the organization remained without financial support. In 2006, when I made my last formal interview with three key members of Art Forum, all of them expressed readiness to continue the work, but they were noticeably disappointed from the lack of interest among the donors and the public institutions. At the time when I write this paper, in 2011, all members of Art Forum started other professional activities and there were no informal activities to support soft skills among children and young people in the children homes. The funds and efforts invested to build an organization of this nature failed due to the lack of interest to continue the support. (Dimitrievski 2009: 56-58)

*Youth center “Pogon” (driver).* “POGON” is a center. “POGON” is an idea. “POGON” is movement – move yourself!” These were the key words used by the founders and members of the Youth Center “Pogon” to invite all enthusiasts desiring action, especially young people, to build a “hill of cultural values” (Pogon 2005: Info) They considered themselves a system of properly positioned gears that “drive: towards creative utilization of free time, generation of creative ideas, supporting artistic creativity and appeasing the hunger of potential audiences for art. The youth center “Pogon” collected a multitude of young, as well as older people that expressed their creativity within the activities on the comics, photography, graphic and web design workshops. “Pogon’s” activities started to attract more and more sympathizers and fans of art and managed to animate a lot of young people desiring creative artistic expression. In addition, “Pogon” managed to cooperate with other associations in the area of culture and cultural activities, within the country and abroad. Unfortunately, “Pogon”, as a formally registered civil association was short lived. The youth center “Pogon” was registered at the beginning of 2006, but as a result of numerous disappointments, all creative activities ceased by the end of the year. One of the biggest disappointments facing the leaders of this association happened in the summer of 2006 when in spite of the fact that they had a contract with the managers of “Narodna Tehnika”<sup>3</sup> to use the premises of this organization, they were forcibly and without any notice kicked out of that building and their premises were given to the pri-

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3 “Narodna Tehnika” was an organization for promotion of technical culture among the young people in Skopje, which was very active during the period of socialism. It included several activities, such as modeling, radio amateurs, traffic, photography, etc. This organization largely contributed to the training of technical staff including some famous engineers. During the transition period it failed to adapt to the new economic circumstances and continued to exist only formally. Its premises were taken over in 2006 by the new private Faculty for Tourism, now the University for Tourism and Management.

vate university for tourism and management. This was followed by other disappointments during the next couple of months, related to the already started activities. After the loss of the premises, they had to find alternative offices where they could present the products of their labors. After the completion of the already started project, the activities of “Pogon” ceased. (Dimitrievski 2009: 49-56)

*NMP*. NMP was an informally organized group from Skopje, comprising young people that implement activities in the field of culture or art or foster an interest for culture or art. The initiative came from a couple of young people that could not stand the passivity of their peers, the cultural void and the lack of activism. They began implementing their idea through a website that they created, which offered a possibility to all young artists from Macedonian to promote their creations. The date when the website was published, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2005, is considered to be the formal date when NMP was established. However the initiative for form this organization came two years earlier. After the publication of the website the number of members of NMP started to progressively increase. When I got to know the work of this cultural collective, the fall of 2006, NMP had about forty active members and young artists which used the NMP to promote their creations. One characteristic of NMP was the mistrust towards domestic or international foundations and large commercial companies and thus financed all of its activities from their own funds. They impressed me with their idea and commitment to unprofitable cultural activism and affirmation of contemporary arts in Macedonia. In addition, I was also fascinated to know about the large level of popularity that the members of NMP enjoy in certain groups of young people in Skopje, thus enabling the NMP members to influence the opinions of those groups of people. Similarly as with other associations, the main difficulties in the management of NMP related to the desire of most members to participate only in the creative part of the activities. In 2006, when I met NMP, all technical activities, which exist even in the case of informal associations, were left only to one person who took over this burden because no one else wanted to accept such responsibilities. This is probably the reason why NMP has not had any significant activities since 2008 until the time when this text was written. (Dimitrievski 2009: 46-49)

## Unsupportive environment for cultural activism

The above descriptions are only a small part of the numerous examples of formal and informal associations of cultural activists in Skopje, which, during the past 20 years have tried to create a space for creative expression and generation of positive values. Taking responsibility for the improvement of the quality of life in the community, the cultural activists developed their own capacities, but also the capacities of the community where they implemented their activities. Their activities motivated other people with similar interests to get involved in the system of taking personal responsibility and a responsibility for their own surroundings thereby helping the development of pluralism at the most basic levels of human organization. If we take into consideration that cultural activism closely relates to the arts, then we may say the activities of cultural activists create opportunities for: cognitive development, promotion of the system of values, behavioral improvements, health improvements, improvements of the relations within the community, and even improvement of the economy. (McCarthy et al. 2004; McQueen-Thomson et al.

2004) Marcell Mauss highlights the advantages of the practice of active inclusion of individuals versus selfishness. He emphasizes that people “should act taking into consideration themselves, the subgroups and the society” (Mauss 1982: 198-210).

Unfortunately, the cultural activists did not manage to cope with the neoliberal policies of the governments which “led” Macedonia through the process of transition, even though they obviously needed a great support to promote the values they represented. All of the cultural activists with whom I had a chance to talk suggested that one of the major weaknesses is the lack of physical space, building, cultural center, that will serve the purpose of main logistical support, including the administrative and technical management of activities. Fewer remarks were related to the lack of interest on the part of the national and local governments to financially support their activities, because they were prepared to work with minimal funding from their own sources, but they would nevertheless have welcomed any financial support. In fact, since the period of socialism very few cultural centers remained in Skopje. Some of them have been commercialized and do not provide too many opportunities for unprofitable activities. Others have been completely transformed into commercial premises, and a third group of centers have degraded and await transformation. However, since the period of socialism there remained other facilities, unused today, which are still state owned and can be used as cultural centers. Some cultural activities were prepared to use their own funds to refit and manage these facilities. The cultural activists that led these initiatives, with the cooperation of several formal and informal associations, asked to use some of the existing and unused state owned facilities in Skopje, in order to form a new cultural center which will enable a logistic support for free creative expression. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives were unsuccessful and they left an aftertaste that policy makers do not take cultural activism seriously. To provide premises for one or more cultural centers with various activities from the area of culture was the least that the central and local government could do to support cultural activism and its sustainability. However they failed to see the advantages from the existence of such forms of cultural expressions and did not demonstrate understanding of the needs of these groups of people. Of all the initiatives for building a cultural center in Skopje, only the association “Kontrapunkt”, in 2006 managed to get a facility owned by the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, for the purposes of the cultural center “Tochka”. However, afterwards that facility was taken away.

Truth be told, the Republic of Macedonia has defined legislation regulating cultural policy at national and local levels. The existing primary and secondary legislation also provide for cultural activism. Thus, article 57 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia states that “the republic shall support, help and protect the development of science, art and culture”, while article 115 emphasizes that “in the units of local self-government, the citizens shall directly and through representatives, participate in the decision making process regarding issues of local significance, and especially in the fields of ..., culture, ... and other fields specified by law”. Article 117 contains the same text as article 115 with one difference, at the beginning where article 115 has “the units of local self-government” article 117 has “the City of Skopje”, because, as line 1 of that article clarifies, the city of Skopje is a special unit of local self-government organized in accordance with the law (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia 1992: 10; 25; 26). The Law on Culture follows the provisions of the Constitution and article 7 and 8 emphasize that the definition of the local and national interests in culture shall be based on the needs of the citizens. Article 8, line 3, of this law

specifically provides for “supporting differences and diversity in culture”. (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia 2003: 2–3) “The National Program of Culture for the period from 2004 to 2008 complies with the principle of democratic distribution and massive acceptance and presentation not only of the national, but also the universal creative achievements. In addition, it will not only aspire to incite the interest and attract potential audiences, but will also attempt to raise the audience to a level of a creative entity in culture and artistic creativity.” (Ministry of Culture 2004) The core principles of the National Program of Culture 2004–2008 are: accessibility, diversity, openness, responsibility and flexibility; and its objectives are: decentralization of culture, utilization of culture as a resource for development, protection and (re)creation of cultural heritage, supporting modern creativity, with a special emphasis on the cultural needs of the young people, reinstatement of the dignity to the creators and the creative achievements and providing conditions conducive to the attainment and protection of highest cultural values, improvement of cultural management. One of the strategic objectives of this Program is “cooperation with other public institutions, the private and the nongovernmental sector”. This emphasizes the significance of the civil sector, recognizes that this sector had been marginalized in the past and accents the need to establish a more intensive support to civil associations. (Ministry of Culture 2004)

These short excerpts from the legislation suggest that the role and participation of the people of the Republic of Macedonia in the creation and implementation of culture is guaranteed and envisioned at all levels. Still, practical experiences point to large deviations from the rights envisaged in the legislation. One of the biggest weaknesses is the broad power to enact and implement decisions concentrated in the office of the Minister of Culture. The second major remark relates to the National Program of Culture 2004–2008, presently the only national program of culture, which has been considered as the basis for cultural policy. However, people disagree with this national program since it failed to involve the civil sector during the preparation phase (Simjanovska 2007a: 45–46, Multimedia 2005: 24). In addition, it attempted to meet the needs of all entities involved in culture and therefore, its critics compare it more to “wish list” rather than to a true cultural policy. The marginalized status of the civil associations has been confirmed in the cultural debates organized by the Center for Performing Arts Multimedia. These debates discussed the status of culture on 2005 and the need to clearly define cultural policy based on the needs of the people. (Multimedia 2005). Still, in spite of the legislative possibilities and the sincere commitments, the cultural activists still cannot attain any greater support from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia, and their initiatives get lost in the system of values that Marcell Mauss defines as destructive for both the individual and the community (Mauss 1982: 198-210).

It seems that cultural activists in Macedonia from the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century failed to attain the right to active participation and practicing of culture as defined by Clifford Geertz, as “a complex of specific templates of behavior – customs, practices, traditions, habit clusters, in a series of control mechanisms, plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what the computer scientists call “programs”)", thus enabling the community to manage its own behavior (Geertz 2007: 13-37; 57; 50-51). When relating this to the concentration of decision making power in the Minister of Culture, one can conclude that the smoldering of the right to actively practice culture has turned the people in the Republic of Macedonia into instruments in the hands of the central government and they became victims of the “neoliberal policies”.

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