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Cultural decentralization in Macedonia: Chance or threat?

Robert Alagjovzovski investigates the state of cultural decentralization in Macedonia and proposes a framework that shifts the focus from the current fixation on Skopje to the regions but retains an open-minded approach to cultural production.

(Lat.– de –separation, partition: centrum – middle, centre; French *décentralisation* –give greater powers (for self-government, etc) to places, branches, etc away from the centre.

"Local societies should preserve their identities and upgrade themselves on the basis of their own historic roots, apart from the economic and functional dependencies of a space in movement".
Manuel Castells, *La société en réseau*, 1996).

Cultural decentralization is one of the priorities of the cultural policy in Macedonia. In this process, "Macedonia enters timely and it should be able to seize its chances" (V. Simjanovska, CIU Multimedia, Skopje). The rest of the countries in the region, particularly Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, have been dwelling upon this issue for several years now, and with rather great intensity. It is a good thing that Macedonia is open for experiences gained by these countries, thus using many essays, verbal and textual analyses and references of experts belonging to the above-mentioned countries in its public debates. According to Oana Radu, project co-ordinator for Regional Cultural Policies, ECUMEST, from Bucharest, decentralization in Southeastern Europe is one of the most important, difficult and urgent questions that has to be looked into. According to Radu, decentralization gains specific weight in post-communist countries which still carry the legacy of a centralized system. Radu notices that, besides the promotion of the basic concept of decision making on a level closest to the ordinary citizen and gravitating towards deconcentration of the responsibilities and taking initiatives, the process of decentralization in Southeastern Europe varies depending on the country, due to different features of each country and the legacy from the centralization. In that respect, Macedonia is not a typical country, together with the other countries from Former Yugoslavia. Until the fall of communism, it had a largely decentralized cultural system.

In Macedonia, according to the assessments of Sasho Klekovski, from the Macedonian Centre for International collaboration, there has been a rather large thickening of the changes in a very short period: from a process of federal multiculture with a developed concept for decentralization in the Former Yugoslavia, we proceeded onto the defining of a new national state,

and in that, with the changes from 1989–91, there was an unprecedented centralization of the system, and from 2001 onwards, with the constitutional changes, we came to define a national, decentralized multicultural, the previous process not being completed with a functional centralized state.

Cultural decentralization

However, after the somewhat paradoxical introduction of centralization in the transition period, the cultural and overall decentralization in the Macedonian public discourse gains greater and greater importance. Why is decentralization important? According to the recently published Expert Report of the European Council for Macedonia, the current system of cultural policy is strongly centralized and administratively managed. Being such, it is highly unsuitable to enable the release of the creative potentials existing in the cultural sector. The development has been hindered by the reshuffle of the personnel on higher positions, as well as a large part of the administrative personnel, depending on the schemes pertaining to the ruling party. It is precisely because of this that we should be thinking of decentralized decision making, thus being in favour of more structures essentially motivated for an unhindered cultural development.

To put it simply, ideological centralization does not correspond with democracy. Macedonia is terribly centralized. The national culture is closed in one (its own) ethno-cultural matrix, kept and arbitrated by small circle of people and institutions. These institutions are most often situated in the capital, hence the gravity towards it. This situation poses a huge gap between the centre and the peripheries. Actually, only the capital of Macedonia is capable of creating a quality cultural product. The budget has monopolistic rights in the procurement of financial means for the cultural sector, with a small percentage of foreign finances, and the non-budget funds, due to a complete lack of effective mechanisms, have been disabled and discriminated against. The total power for decision-making is concentrated in the infamous commissions and Ministry Councillors, and in that, according to the valid current law for culture, the Minister plays the role of an absolute monarch. Nothing can be done without his/her signature. Centralization, strict hierarchy, patriarchal subordination, "the firm hand", best expressed by the notorious motto – *one God, one Nation, one Führer* – is typical of the totalitarian, autocratic regimes. Centralization that embraces only one truth, one elite, great power concentrated in only a few people, not only is undesirable, it is also impossible in this contemporary *modus vivendi*. Pluralistic society in which we live in, different opportunities for emancipation and development of different cultural and ideologic sites, in time, starts to put pressure on the centralized structures, elites, stories, aesthetics, in the struggle to achieve their own interests, and that, in consequence, asks for additional means for pressure on the part of the privileged minority in order to retain the power. Let alone the fact that the one and centric truth, in time, starts to wear out its aesthetic and semantic opportunities, and all it comes down to is just an empty meaningless phrase.

Decentralization is the most adequate form for today's *post-secular* society. According to the German erudite Jürgen Habermas, the post-secular society, i.e. the ideologically neutral state, does not prejudice its political decisions in any direction in the conflict between the rivalling claims. Regardless of the traumatic way it entered into it, Macedonia, with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, has already become a post-secular society. However, in order for this society to work well, the aspirants belonging to different truths, faiths, ideologies, cultures, aesthetics, need to handle the meeting with the others, on

a rational level and discard the use of violence as a means for propagating the truths about their religion. It's the minimal consensus, the necessary integrating moment without which decentralized stories disintegrate into anarchy and chaos. Without decentralization but also without the minimal netting, tangent, compromising, negotiated surfaces, we are again bound to fail, with only an exhausting, bloody battle ahead of us; a battle to centralize one dominant "truth", story, against all the others, that after a time, because of their "military" defeat shall have to step aside as subdued.

Cultural decentralization must mean reducing the power of the Minister and the Ministry. The arbitration for the distribution of the cultural goods must be transferred to several funds that will divide the money on the basis of various different criteria and program assignments. Instead of the strict division of means to the privileged national institutions as opposed to all the others, there should be equal conditions for accessing these cultural goods, between the national, local, public, private and the non-government cultural institutions. Strong local councils will autonomously distribute their funds based on criteria containing in themselves the particulars of every local cultural site.

The mayor of Veles, Ace Kocovski thinks that with the decentralization of government better conditions will emerge for cultural decentralization. In his opinion, the municipalities being the closest government to the citizens will be more interested than the centralized government to create better conditions for the cultural development on a local level. Decentralization will better the efficiency of the cultural institutions, having a better insight than the centralized managing organs into the everyday problems they are facing. Each municipality will have the chance to contribute to the affirmation and the development of its own cultural life, and the results will only be its own success or failure. The priorities for investing in culture will be determined by the local government according to its needs, and it will provide a rational expenditure of the financial means in possession of the municipalities.

Recommendations from the international experts

From the perspective of cultural decentralization, the experts expect cultural changes that will bring about new quality in the life of the local communities, make them more attractive and more alive, especially for the younger generation by improving their social life. It is their opinion that, for that purpose, we should construct a local identity profile for urban, suburban and rural areas. The profile should consist of traditional and sub cultural values. These types of projects are viewed as particularly attractive for the ethnically mixed communities, especially with the young people whose traditional way of life does not permit them to meet other people. Local cultural activities involve turning away from the celebrations of national or ethnic minorities jubilees. Instead, they should focus on building mutual values and image. The idea of cultural decentralization is precisely the avoiding of ethnic division and the focus on Skopje and its peripheries. Various events would enable the regional connections, inter-state collaboration, international exchange of events, through different fairs, festivals, and manifestations. The towns would raise their level of specific cultural contents, at the same time overcoming the bad trends of concentrating all cultural activities in Skopje. In addition, the experts recommend the support of literary creation within the frames of the municipalities; recognized authors giving lectures in creative writing for the young and talented, pass on their knowledge and skills, enhance the use of new information-communication technologies, enhance the supply of library books and international connection of the libraries via Internet. The libraries would

become focal points, where people, especially young people, will use the new technically advanced tools for gaining knowledge, which later can be passed onto the older generations. The libraries would also redefine their role, providing access to the universal means for communication, i.e. act as a sort of media centre, which is vital in the system of continual education.

Financing and cultural decentralization

Financing of the culture in decentralized conditions remains one of the issues that frightens people most from the cultural institutions about to become part of the local self-governing. Sanjin Dragojevic, a Croatian expert in cultural policy, thinks that on the long-run, the fiscal capacity of the local units is of crucial importance. According to the law for local self-governing from 2002, the municipalities in the area of culture are responsible for the institutional and financial support of the cultural institutions and projects, the nourishment of folklore, traditions, customs, old craftsmanship and similar cultural values, the organization of cultural manifestations, and inciting specific forms of cultural creation. According to the dynamics of the operative government's program for the decentralization of all spheres of social living, there is a transition period that should finish by the end of 2004, and full decentralization should come into force somewhere in 2005. This means that, during this period, even the institutions that will be stated local, will continue to be financed by the state budget in order to protect the existing network of cultural institutions from unwanted consequences. Which of the already existing cultural institutions will be made local is completely up to the municipal authorities. The reform has been preconditioned by the passing of a legal package: municipality financing law, the new law for the town of Skopje, the law for territorial division and other sublegal acts that are in the process of passing currently. The Ministry is aware of the fact that if these necessary regulations for the form of the local self-governing are not passed, then the cultural decentralization will not be a completed process. The institutions that will not be national, and will be offered to the units of the local self-governing in this initial period will be financed by the state budget through the Ministry of Culture, in view of the fact that the law for municipality financing has not been passed yet. There is also the possibility for them to be financed by the Ministry of Culture for projects that are of national interest through annual announcements. The Ministry of Culture has the possibility to realize mutual project for the financing of certain cultural activities with the municipalities.

As they acknowledge in the Ministry itself, at the moment, there are no real possibilities for the financing of the cultural institutions by the municipalities. Since 1991 until today, there has not been a foundation of new local institutions, although there have been legal grounds for them to be founded. Still, they are optimistic that the climate will change once we will take certain steps: creating all legal and material preconditions, vitalizing the culture on a local level, transparency in the creation of the national cultural policy that will not exclude the role of the local self-government actively to participate in this process, promoting new relations between the state and the local government in the spirit of civil society in the cultural sphere, reorganizing the culture that will be managed by the concept for decentralization and the nourishment of various cultural activities, development of the cultural tourism and cultural industry in the municipalities and particular support for the underdeveloped municipalities.

Ljupco Ristovski, manager of the sector for coordination and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, with the Government of R. Macedonia,

representing also a part of the system for national coordination of foreign donations, emphasizes that, regarding the financing there is no cause for concern, since there will be no transfer of responsibilities until the financing has been cleared out. In his opinion, the Ministry of Culture should be able to find a way to raise cultural decentralization to a level of government priority, and via the national coordinator for foreign donations organize an activity for mobilizing the donors. In the area of decentralization the international community will sponsor activities for the strengthening of the capacity of the local units and the appropriate infrastructure. This, according to him, includes the buildings of the related cultural institutions.

Avoiding the provincialization of a decentralized culture

Macedonia is facing an extremely difficult process – performing complete cultural decentralization and avoiding the provincialization of that culture. According to Corina Suteu, the President of the ECUMEST Association, the immediate and most negative consequence for transition countries is that on a local/regional level there is a prevalence for traditional and conservative art forms, harming the artistic creativity that has yet to be unleashed. The implementation of the decentralization process itself speaks in favour of the fact that we have realized one very important non-provincial idea – the need to destroy centralization, strict hierarchy and the subordination of cultural values. The openness towards initiatives coming from below, democracy, and accessibility to cultural values is an important civilization gain. During this process, the most important thing is not to let the already ruined transitional cultural system to fall apart completely. In that case, we would have cultural institutions creating chaos, limitations, imperfections, and low quality level of the created cultural values. On the contrary, what we should do is a healthy, decentralized, open, interactive and highly coordinated system of local cultural institutions. The ministry should prepare a serious program that is to be carried out in stages, for several years, intended for the stability and strengthening of the local cultural institutions. It should play a key role in the remedying of their infrastructure together with other partners; provide help in the further training and equipping the personnel; state clear objectives of the new local cultural policy; have space for a local initiative and above all pay attention to avoid the occurrence of euphoria or fruitless multiplication of anachronistic and stereotypical cultural values.

So, in order to avoid the possible provincialization of the local cultural institutions, the Ministry should lead the process of transforming the cultural institutions, managing and facilitating the process of forming long-lasting partnerships on a local level, posing coordinative and counselling bodies on an internal regional level, as a first step for a possible integration of the local cultural policies, form a special fund that will apply for grants for projects strengthening the exchange of cultural values within the country and that will encourage the integrative and citizenship dimension of the local policies. The collaboration and partnership projects should be a key component that will maintain the local institutions in a mobile state. A special place in the local cultural policies should have the inter-border and over-border collaboration, i.e. the external regionalization with which the Macedonian local cultural products will be exported in the region as a permanent, relatively cheaper and more accessible form of cultural exchange. Throughout this whole process of decentralization and deprovincialization, both the Ministry of Culture and the local cultural institutions should form strategic partnerships, above all with the NGOs, with whom they can find joint interest, for the local institutions to offer their infrastructure capacity, and the non-government sector to perform a

transfer of knowledge.

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