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## Capital of culture or cultural desert?

Relations between the cultural sphere in Maribor and the municipal government have worsened sharply in recent weeks. The deterioration was set off by the shock experienced by both nonprofit publishing houses (the student publishing house Litera for its book programme and Aristej for Dialogi) when they were notified of the results of the public grant applications to the City Municipality of Maribor for co-financing of cultural programmes. Funding to these organizations was cut by 40 percent; the reason was the reduction of the line item for publishing in the municipal budget. The fact that the publishing houses knew nothing of this change during the preparation of the budget attests to the absence of communication between the municipal services and the cultural sphere. As is evident from the budget, overall funding for culture has been increased, but only due to capital investments (in which the main achievement of the mayor is the construction of the new Puppet Theatre), while the financing of ongoing programmes on average has remained the same as the previous year, or even been partially reduced. Since only a very small portion of the overall budget is allocated to publishing (after the reduction, a mere 0.5 percent of all funding for cultural programmes), it is not clear what purpose this radical reduction in this area serves. Thus it is impossible to escape the feeling that this is an entirely political decision due to unfamiliarity with the area. It is a fact that within the mayor's cabinet there is no influential figure from the field of culture, nor are there any cultural figures among the members of the new city council. Nonprofit publishing, with its more demanding content, unknown in the popular media space, has in this way become a victim of budgetary deal-making.

The next shock was the proposal by the municipal administration to the Maribor Pekarna squat that it relocate to new premises, so that the municipality could sell the land it is currently located on. This proposal was made even though the Pekarna complex is part of the municipal cultural programme and there was funding in the 2008 budget for the preparation of documents for its renovation. The municipality now says that their funds for this investment no longer exist, and that as a result they cannot apply for EU funding. Pekarna artists suddenly have to defend their existence and publicly give an account of urban youth culture and justify why the city needs it.

Thus it is that representatives of a part of Maribor's cultural scene must engage in public campaigns and apply pressure through the media on the new municipal administration in order to demonstrate who they are and how and why they exist. This is happening to Dialogi after 44 years of publication! It is a very humiliating feeling, which reminds middle and older generations of the city's past, which for the most part was not very favourably disposed towards intellectuals and artists. In the past century, Maribor lost its identity three times, first after WWI, and then again after WWII, when it became a centre of

industry and its way of life was dictated by the working class and the technical intelligentsia, while culture could not breathe freely under the control of the party semi-intelligentsia. A number of intellectuals found the city unfriendly, and the legendary Bojan Stih's description of Maribor as an "industrial desert" is well known. The exodus of the humanities intelligentsia and artists from the city has been constant and massive. The third loss of identity occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, when the decline of industry also impoverished the city and there remained of Stih's industrial desert only a desert without industry. However, in the last decade the situation seemed to improve. Several investments in culture made the city more attractive to artists, the establishment of the Faculty of Arts was expected to strengthen the humanities intelligentsia, the exodus of creative workers was partially stemmed, and several world class artists' groups are operating in the city. The municipality even prepared a city cultural programme for the period 2007–2011 and it seemed that it would pay attention to culture in a more considered and structured way. But all this optimism is still on very shaky grounds, since numerous cultural programmes rely on a single personality with strong unifying and organizing capabilities. Many artists and professors in the humanities merely commute to the city from elsewhere and do not live here. And if I look back on my own 25 years in Maribor culture, of which 15 have been in publishing, I have to admit that I also always kept one foot in Ljubljana, since I never would have been able to carry out such demanding programmes if I had relied only on the potential available in Maribor.

With the recent conflicts caused by the municipality's decisions, the tensions within culture itself, between high and urban culture on the one hand and folk, popular, and rural culture (which prevails in the city and also in media coverage) on the other, have been further exacerbated, since the former feels justifiably threatened due to the events described above. As a result of this feeling of being threatened and unappreciated, the flight of intellectuals from the city can increase any moment. The moment is more fateful than it seems at first glance. If the trees which have grown in the recent period are thoughtlessly chopped down, the desert will once again show itself in all its expanse.

Of course we know that the municipality experiences budget shortfalls in many areas and that the financial situation is overstrained, but this is no excuse for the inconsistent and careless treatment of culture. And especially when the politicians in charge are at the same time pushing Maribor's candidacy for the title of European Capital of Culture, with all the accompanying pomp. The absence of content and concept has accompanied Maribor projects from their inception, and even today no artistic director for the ECC project has been named, even as the mayor has begun to put together a programme on his own. We cannot otherwise understand his public invitation to director Tomaz Pandur, known for his extravagant theatre spectacles, and the signing of an agreement with the Vienna State Opera regarding its visit to Maribor in the framework of the ECC programme. In both cases we are talking about expensive theatre productions which even with all their repeat performances can provide for only a few days of the programme in the entire project. Experience to date with the capitals of culture shows that on average almost 80 percent of the programme is financed with public funding, of which a little more than half comes from the state and the remainder from the region and city itself. How does the city intend to finance this programme when it is reducing funding for those who already exist in the city? And why is the mayor supporting programmes such as the two mentioned when planned investments for 2008 for the renovation and expansion of the Gallery of Art have been

eliminated from the budget? For there are exhibitions alone in the ECC programme which can offer local residents as well as foreign visitors a programme which is always (daily) open and available. There are also a lot of 0's in the 2008 budget under the line item investments from structural funds, and thus we can justifiably question both the degree of planning and thought that has gone into the preparations for the ECC programme and the existence generally of a well thought out cultural policy for the city.

As I write this, Maribor is about to defend its candidacy for the ECC in Brussels. By the time *Dialogi* is published, the results will likely already be known. In either event (whether Maribor is accepted or rejected) there will remain doubts in the domestic cultural scene, given all that has transpired, as to whether the city will not in any case remain just a desert.

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Published 2008-11-14

Original in Slovenian

Contribution by Dialogi

First published in *Dialogi* 10/2008 (Slovenian version)

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