Culture in Croatia during the transition period

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When Andrea Zlatar investigates the contemporary and recent history of Croatian culture and cultural policy she finds out that the most horrifying consequence of the transition and war is not the material impoverishment of Croatian society, but the utter destruction of value systems that used to apply to specific fields of human activity.

Introduction

Although there are many divergent opinions on Croatian culture [1] of the nineties, and different material and spiritual traces, only one analytical document has appeared - Cultural Policy in Croatia, National Report, written for the European Programme of National Cultural Policy Reviews. This document was written in the mid-nineties, during 1996 and 1997, and it was published in 1998, in Croatian and English editions. A brief report written by a group of European cultural policy experts and entitled Croatian Cultural Policy: From Barriers to Bridges was published that same year. National Report, written under the supervision of project director Dr. Vjeran Katunarić, a sociologist of culture, was greeted by the Council of Europe as an exemplary document of its kind. The report shows that Croatian authors’ views coincide in all essential points with the European criteria for understanding the place and role of culture in a specific society, and the awareness of the manifold nature of cultural policy in contemporary world, which should serve to

“join and harmonise diverse legitimate interests: the globalising ones and the nationally specific, traditional and innovative, majority and minority ones, concentrated power and participation, centralising and decentralising, state and the civil society, national culture and multiculturalism, professionalism and amateurism etc.” (Report, XV)

But what does the national report has to say about the existing situation in the culture, and how does it evaluate this situation? Because, whether they want to or not, the independent experts who wrote the National Report are examining the central period of
the political, and therefore also the cultural rule of CDU (Croatian Democratic Union – in Croatian, HDZ). From the first free parliamentary elections in Croatia, which took place in 1989, until the elections of January 3, 2000, the Croatian political scene was dominated by the right-wing party CDU. Within the first three years of their coming to power, their rule has already taken on a shape of a one-party, totalitarian political system. In the ten years of their rule, no cultural policy was ever clearly specified (not a single separate document exists on the topic of cultural policy), but its main intent can nevertheless be deduced from the particular actions taken and views expressed in the field of culture management during this period.

The two main factors used by the experts to determine the scope of culture in the nineties, were: transition period and war. Obviously, neither of these factors is primarily rooted in culture. They are symptomatic of the situation in which the entire Croatian society has found itself, and culture, of course, shares the fate of the whole. Transition and war, however, are much more than “external circumstances” or easily definable terms to make the analysis more focused. The transition is most frequently described as a “slow and painful process with uncertain prospects for successful resolution”. This definition has been widely accepted by the media, and its metaphors of illness clearly emphasise the resistance of the public not only to the phenomenon itself, but also to the attempts to conceptualise it. On the other hand, the war which lasted from 1991 until 1995 (in Croatia, it is called the Homeland War) has left a number of visible and invisible scars in Croatian culture. The material ravages of war can easily be enumerated, from destroyed churches and burnt libraries to stolen art collections (i.e. the Vukovar museum), and, with sufficient funding, they can also be restored. However, the invisible, spiritual consequences of war are not so easy to tally up or even recognise. In terms of culture, the phrases used most often include the destruction of the value system, the lowering of professional standards, and a self-referential, closed culture. To make things worse, even in the early nineties the word “war” has already been transformed from the description of the actual situation to a metaphorical excuse for everything that has gone wrong. As a case in point, let us mention the collapse of the only network of bookstores in Croatia, which used to be owned by the publishing house “Mladost”. Although the real reason for the destruction of this distribution chain lies in the badly conducted privatisation of “Mladost” company, the excuse used most often in the public was that the “war cut the book market in half”. While this was certainly true, because the war had blocked access to a number of Slavonian and Dalmatian towns, it does not change the fact that the book market would have been ruined anyway, for the simple reason that the distribution network was destroyed. There are many similar examples. War and transition became convenient excuses for failures which were, in truth, the results of bad management in culture, a pretext under which the important infrastructure reforms were avoided, a mask to work for personal advantage in the sphere of the public good.

The conclusion of the National Report evaluates the existing situation and the effects of the cultural policy in relation to the (above-mentioned) goals set. The results are divided into three areas, according to how successful they are in terms of achieving the goal of national interest. In the first, the most successful one, is legislation (the coverage of all areas with laws and by-laws), funding (in the part referring to the national budget for culture; tax policy was deemed questionable due to a high 22% VAT, which applied even to books!), the labour market (unemployment in culture is below the overall unemployment rate), education, monuments, archives and libraries. The second, less
successful group includes decentralisation, participation, literature, publishing, film, music, the visual arts, theatre, multicultural relations and international cooperation.

The National Report states that “the national interest as well as the interest of marketisation/privatisation has not been achieved or has not been clearly defined and operationalised, or the Ministry of Culture does not have sufficient competence in the following domains” (ibid. 268): privatisation, research, development, information and the media.

Having evaluated and analysed the situation, the National Report offered its own recommendations in 1998, also citing the opinions of European experts who conducted their own analyses and who have evaluated the National Report. However, no one was under obligation to actually follow these recommendations. Thus the negative trends in the field of culture continued until the change of power brought about by the elections held at the beginning of 2000, when the first newly written documents on cultural policy in Croatia appeared, specifying its goals and interests. [2] During 2000, the Ministry of Culture began working on a host of new legislative measures, the main goal of which was decentralisation of cultural management. This would be achieved by introducing “cultural councils” as the main decision-making units. As the fundamental goals of its cultural policy, the Ministry of Culture now stresses the artistic freedom, cultural pluralism, decentralisation and intercultural communication as well as encouraging the artistic self-responsibility - in other words, returning the culture to cultural workers. [3]

**The situation in 1989/1990**

Methods of organising and financing cultural activities in Yugoslavia have undergone several stages from 1945: [4]

Soviet administrative government-controlled management and the ideology of developing socialist attitudes and communist avantgardism (until 1950); 1950-1975: the gradual decentralisation of culture and opening up towards Western cultural influences; the struggle between centralist and republican financing bodies; 1975-1990: introduction of the self-management model of labour to the cultural field; cultural activities were mainly organised and financed through so-called “self-management communities of interest in culture” (SIZ); these communities were organised territorially, from the local to the republican level; basically, it is no different from budgetary financing because they are both the result of legal compulsion and regulations, not free exchange of goods.

In the late eighties, a phenomenon of “pseudo market” arose in the former Yugoslavia. The political system was unwilling to relinquish the decision-making process to self-management, or to establish free market relations. The financing through the SIZ communities served to cover up a partially dehierarchised, but still a fundamentally budgetary method of financing culture. In some cultural fields (filmmaking, theatre, publishing), forms of independent association appeared, seemingly functioning on the market-oriented basis.

When we talk about the eighties culture today, we usually disregard the elements of financial and structural organisation as being less important, focusing instead on the
processes of de-ideologisation and free intercultural exchange. Although the eighties were not the most stellar years of the post-war period in the creative sense of the word (in case of Croatia, this honour firmly belongs to the sixties and the first half of the seventies [5]), they will be remembered as the years in which a number of artistic initiatives were launched that remained the source of inspiration for the alternative culture in the next decade: new literary groups were formed, gathered around magazines QUORUM and GORDOGAN; EUROKAZ, theatre festival featuring new tendencies was founded in 1987; feminist scene developed; new independent media appeared under the auspices of youth organisations (Omladinski radio/Youth Radio, later renamed Radio 101); a considerable number of contemporary theoretical books was published, mostly from the field of humanities. All of these new developments made the “wall” against the Western world less visible, almost imperceptible. The public discussions were opening many taboo subjects from the communist past, particularly those tied to the period of conflict with Cominform, and Goli otok [6]. The only taboo subject in culture left untouched at the end of the eighties was nationalism.

The cultural elite in the eighties consisted of the left-leaning liberal intellectuals and middle-class intellectuals who did not carry the stigma of being associated with the nationalist movement in the seventies. The professional level of cultural production was rather high, and the financial support to the culture seemingly satisfactory, thanks to the inflation and the state printing money without sufficient funds. This, then, was the Croatian cultural situation when the Berlin Wall fell and the socialist and communist blocks collapsed. The loss of supranational ideology, the loss of common supranational state, the loss of common Yugoslav cultural space had to be compensated for by establishing an autonomous, independent national state and the creation of a new set of values and new cultural policy.

**Pragmatism instead of strategy**

On the highest legal level, represented by the constitutional documents (the Constitution, passed in 1990, and constitutional amendments adopted in 1992), culture is defined as the national priority. While in the socialist system culture was unmistakably treated as consumption (rather than a strategic resource), however profitable in the ideological sense, at the beginning of nineties culture was being touted as the primary element of our development, including not only art and cultural heritage, but also science and education. The autonomy of creative work was guaranteed, and the heritage was viewed as the supreme national asset. However, the budgetary funding did not match this celebratory rhetoric, and the legislation lagged behind the constitutional provisions. Even as late as 1993, the culture was being financed through the “cultural funds”, which is really another name for the inherited model of financing culture. This financing model became increasingly centralised with time, until all decisions, whether administrative, conceptual or financial, were being made in one central place, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia. During this initial period, cultural policy and cultural development were neither defined nor elaborated; the basic principles were taken from the very generalised Strategy of Development of the Republic of Croatia, written in 1990. This document stated the basic principles, too general to be implemented without further elaboration: free artistic and cultural creativity, de-ideologisation of culture, professionalism and responsibility, stimulation of talented and successful individuals, institutions, programmes, pluralism of cultural initiatives. [7] From 1993 and onwards, a
“model of public needs” was established, listing all cultural activities and affairs, events and manifestations of interest for the Republic of Croatia. Once a year, the Ministry of Culture would announce a short-term competition to which all interested institutions and individuals would send their proposals. The Ministry (and often the Minister himself) would then make a decision on the financing of individual projects and the amount of the funds granted. There were no permanent and independent cultural councils, only commissions for specific fields, also appointed by the Minister, i.e., the Ministry of Culture. This model of financing culture was in effect throughout the nineties. The National Report offers this comment: “Instead of following a strategic conception, things are “taken as they come” with a mixture of old an new pragmatism. The attitude that culture is a means of production, not only of consumption, is new; the continuing acceptance of restrictive budgetary conditions, and perhaps most importantly, the choice of priorities, are old.” (26)

The principles of implied cultural policy of the mid-nineties can clearly be seen in the list of 17 priorities given by the Ministry of Culture in 1996, with the special emphasis on preserving the cultural heritage (monuments), recreating the representational image of national cultural identity (festivals, Croatian design, publications in foreign languages) and history (lending a spectacular note to historical themes, e.g. through staging historical battles in Croatia), and finally fitting both the above criteria into Croatia’s tourist offer (ibid. 27). It is not difficult to see the ideological background of such priorities, because they point directly to the field of national, traditionalist culture in the atmosphere of new conservatism. It is patently clear that the principle of “de-ideologisation of culture”, as started in 1990, has been abandoned, which is not a surprise, considering that “culture cannot live outside the ideological currents of a society” which is why “the postulate of ideological neutrality... can be taken as a typical expression of early national optimism and idealism” (ibid. 27). The fact that the traditionalist national cultural products may appear as tourist products should not be confused with the desire to establish a free cultural market. It is simply a marketing activity of the state, which needs sponsors and additional funding for its cultural forms of self-representation.

The most important concepts of this period are certainly national unity and spectacularisation [8], which explains the practical choices in financing priorities, as seen in countless manifestations with representational function such as festivals or big exhibitions. In ten years of an independent Croatian state, the public was never presented with even an outline of cultural policy. The only way to gouge the relationship of the state towards culture was to look at the actions the state was taking. The Ministry of Culture, as the central source of funds for the cultural activities, creates the cultural policy by a practical choice of projects to support. The national interest of the Croatian state seemed to lie in projects with representational functions, either festivals or other manifestations. If our only guideline was the number of “opening ceremonies” for exhibitions, spectacular premieres of historic dramas and operas, and launches of expensive, representative books, the picture of Croatian culture would indeed be rich and successful. However, the Croatian state during the nineties failed to invest in the “horizontal” cultural activities and the cultural infrastructure, nor did it show any support for diversity, ideological and/or aesthetic. This has led to a severe polarisation between the state, and statist, national, conservative culture on one hand, and alternative, urban, aesthetically provocative culture oriented towards the values of Western Europe and
operating within the field of insufficiently developed institutions of civil society on the other.

The situation in Croatian culture in 1996/7. The National Report makes this very unambiguous evaluation: “We do not know of any case in which state bodies have approved the financing of books, theatre performances of films whose contents diverge from main ideological orientation mentioned. On the other hand, we must also emphasise that, to the best of our knowledge, the Ministry has never initiated the banning of any work with an “objectionable” content”. (ibid. 28) Countless artistic and cultural projects were left outside the confines of official culture funded by the Ministry of Culture, so they had to look for other sources of finances, most frequently from foreign foundations. The foundation Open Society Institute – Croatia was often called “the parallel Ministry of Culture” during the nineties. This foundation provided financial support for many different cultural fields – publishing, theatre, film-making, visual arts – but always for those projects that did not bear the ideological stamp of the national culture promoted by the Ministry of culture as representational of the state. In the second part of the nineties, the pragmatic decisions in the Ministry of Culture have completely fallen to the level of voluntarism, and a considerable number of “institutions with moderate orientation” that were not sufficiently “politically acceptable” had to seek financial help from various foundations. The foundation Open Society was by far the most active player in this field. During these years, Matica Hrvatska, a long-standing cultural institution with a high national visibility, regularly published a biweekly magazine for culture, art and science called Vijenac, with significant financial assistance (covering almost half of all expenses) from the Open Society. Similarly, many university libraries obtained computer equipment and literature from abroad with the help of the same foundation. Common sense dictates that these kinds of purchases and activities should be covered by the competent state Ministries. At the same time, the state media, the press and especially the electronic media, publicly vilified and censured all “beneficiaries” of alternative funding, calling them traitors, spies, enemies, mercenaries, “black, green and yellow devils”, accusing them of fraternising with the “external enemies”, a handy expression we inherited from the former Yugoslav system.

The idea of middle class culture: a middle ground between the “elite” and the “common people”

If there is one thing in which the views of the socialist-communist system coincide with those of the right-wing totalitarian parties, it is in their shared intolerance for the independent intellectual, a middle-class individual. Labels such as a “bourgeois person” and “middle-class culture” could lead to prison in the fifties, and significantly hinder the publishing of one’s work and public visibility in the seventies and eighties. The middle-class culture survived in the socialist-communist period mostly through everyday rituals, which frequently solidified into the conventions of a (petty) bourgeois life that protected private lives from the totalitarian jaws of ideology. In socialism, the middle-class culture was recognised in regular attendance of opera as the symbolic apex of (petty) bourgeois culture, it was preserved in apartments decorated to denote urbaniity of their dwellers and in the highly ritualised habits of the everyday culture of living. This form of middle-class culture lends itself beautifully to sociological analyses of preserving (even rescuing) the urban mentality in the socialist countries, where the process of destroying the middle class and bourgeoisie took decades, without ever achieving “the final solution of the
middle class problem”. On the other hand, the analysis of the middle class involvement in the production and reception of culture in socialist and post-socialist countries is made more difficult due to the lack of analogy with the development of middle-class culture and the resistance to it in the shape of the alternative culture, which was taking place in the capitalist countries from the fifties onwards. It is interesting to note how one idiosyncratic type of highbrow, middle-class culture came to being in the socialist Yugoslavia – I am referring to the cultural generation of ’68. They were, generationally speaking, the “children of partisan generals”, and their entrance into the public arena was marked by implementing the relationship middle class/anti middle class modelled on the Western revolution of ’68. It is readily apparent that this analogy could not be complete because the basic centre of political power – the Party and its ideology – could not be directly attacked. Furthermore, the Party (Tito) made a wise move: they embraced the ‘sixty-eighters’ and used the entire situation to “purge” their own ranks. The consequences of ’68 played a key role in constituting the avant-garde/alternative art in the eighties Yugoslavia. Its proponents were former ‘sixty-eighters’, and this “avantgarde/alternative culture” actually became the elite cultural product which received huge support from the Communist state. The “middle-class” attribute, of course, could not be used. The alternative culture remains the constitutive element of the “elite middle-class culture” in many post-socialist countries, where this kind of culture stands for resistance to a totalitarian political system which cancels and denies the right to individuality.

In the nineties Croatia, the “highbrow, yet middle-class culture” has once again become, as in the socialist period, a refuge, a sanctuary in which the resistance to the dominant unifying ideology of total national unity was nurtured. The shortest possible equation of the nineties culture in Croatia could be expressed thus: the highbrow/middle-class the populist, with the note that the key term for defining the middle class in this equation would be individualism. The situation in the last decade was further aggravated by the fact that the middle-class intellectuals were unprepared, to the point of naivete, for the political changes in the nineties: the last thing they expected was that they would have to, once again, fight the totalitarian, populist, anti-intellectual tendencies in the society. The defence mechanisms that helped the middle class survive the socialist period broke under the pressure of the early nineties. The founding of the Croatian state and the war that followed created a totalising feeling of unity, and, in the majority of the population, the affirmative identification in the sphere of the national. However, the nineties in Croatia have also brought a new phenomenon – the creation of a new social elite, comprising the members of the political elite, which donned the guise of the “middle class” primarily on the level of flaunting status symbols such as clothes, private property, luxury cars. This new elite also needed the paintings on the walls of their villas, they needed public places to appear – theatres and museums served this purpose. The culture was being exploited and used much like it was in the socialist period, when the erstwhile socialist elite needed its “abstract painters” and best seats on opening nights in the theatre. The difference was that this new elite co-opted the semantic field of the middle class, which the former elite was not allowed to do so for ideological reasons.

The mechanisms of destroying the modern middle-class individualism in the nineties differed from the old ones: they are not present on the declarative level, because middle class is promoted as a value, while in reality, the middle class is subjected to impoverishment, social degradation and marginalisation. The new “value system” is the
one based on practical experience: in this new order, one can steal and kill without being punished for it, one can become rich overnight, one can buy all social privileges, such as reputation, college degree, connections with artists and a place in the top box with the President, interviews in the press and appearances on TV shows. The mental makeup of CDU’s government was openly and unabashedly anti-intellectual. [9] The basic system of middle-class values, in which one’s expertise and professionalism guaranteed a job, and the job well done guaranteed good earnings - was completely destroyed. The most horrifying consequence of the transition period and war is not the material impoverishment of the Croatian society, but the utter destruction of value systems that used to apply to specific fields of human activity.

The average citizen was completely unprotected from the transition period privatisation, utterly horrified by the plundering of early capitalism, left without any possibility of finding a space where she could protect her individualism and privacy. The cultural space, which for decades represented resistance to the ruling communist ideology, has lost its function too. Or could it be that the culture remains the space for resistance, because the culture exists solely as a means of defying reality and the status quo? The very survival of culture as a public activity available to all came into question, because the main method in which CDU protected its position of power was by denying the access to public arena to all those who thought differently – all those who failed to put their ‘entire heart and soul’ into the proclaimed ‘spiritual revival’, the main goal of which was to enslave culture, turning it into a tool of state ideology, based on the idea of national and religious unity, ethnic and religious “purity” and political suitability.

I would therefore say that the “alternative cultural scene” of the nineties encompasses all cultural and artistic initiatives that managed to survive – although not mutually connected – without state subsidies and financing of culture. We are talking here about a number of individual, we could even call them “private” projects (in the best sense of the word, in which the private preserves the essence of the individual and the independent) which are not connected by a common poetic, aesthetic or ideological thread. This definition of “alternative culture”, based on Croatian reality, is certainly considerably different form the artistically conceived and socially connected alternative scene in the West. What unites these otherwise diverse projects (from art workshops to publishing projects, from modern dance to independent film productions) is an attempt to establish aesthetically determined value systems, which would enable us to evaluate the products of Croatian artistic and cultural scene in the contemporary international context. This burgeoning process should establish the criteria for evaluation which connect us synchronically and horizontally in the context of contemporary cultural production, but it should also function diachronically, by linking us to cultural tradition and the respectable aesthetic value systems which were strongly present in the Croatian culture in two periods in the twentieth century – the thirties and the sixties. One of the problems which the contemporary young Croatian scene of today has to face is the fact that all the connections and ties within Croatian artistic and cultural tradition have been broken – the aggressive official insistence during the last decade that cultural heritage is the only valuable thing has resulted in enormous resistance to anything seen as the part of that heritage. All the generational bridges seem to have been burnt and each generation has to begin the task of establishing value systems anew, as if nothing existed before they came along. This cannot be a good long-term approach in the culture where tradition certainly plays a very important part.
National culture and globalisation

The nineties Croatia seems to have two cultures, two separate, unconnected, mutually exclusive cultural spheres. The only way in which these two meet is through a conflict, a struggle - with both sides convinced that their way is the only way. One culture is what I would call ethnocentric and neoconservative, focused on the past and self-referential. It is autistic and xenophobic, although, in an absurd twist, its proponents often cite common European roots in their investigations of mythical Croatian identity. As the main motto of such culture we could use the line from a nationalist, kitschy song that was a big hit in the early nineties: Croatia, ever since the 7th century. To be more precise, this culture is the radical expression of CDU’s cultural policy, best exemplified (then and now) in the cultural weekly Hrvatsko slovo. [10]

Then there is the culture of independent intellectuals, writers and critics who published their views in Feral, Arkzin, Vijenac, Zarez [11]. This is a contemporary, modern culture, which is trying to examine and critically interpret the present. It is open and interested in communication, and it measures and compares its own accomplishments against its nearer and farther neighbours. It is a culture of translation, a culture of connection, a culture of change. It believes in asking questions, and does not always expect a clear-cut answer in return. It is a culture of provocation, not affirmation.

These two cultures exist side by side throughout the Croatian society. On one side we have those who reject everything “that comes from the outside”, who resist communication and change. This does not include only older population, as might be expected, but rather those people - not only here but in a number of other countries of Central and Eastern Europe - who cannot adapt culturally. The other group consists of those who unreservedly accept everything that comes from abroad, mostly young people, who can adapt to demands of new times with more success. This phenomenon has been discussed by Kazimierz Krzysztofek of the Polish Cultural Institute, who calls it the phenomenon of cultural dualism [12], meaning a parallelism of two cultures and two value systems. The new system stems from market economy and brings the idea of open society, demanding from culture the establishment of the cultural market, as the natural continuation of the mass culture market. The other, older system, dismisses the ideas of cultural market, instead relying completely on the system of state subsidies in the cultural sphere.

Croatian culture in the nineties kept vacillating between these two opposites, one of which was marked by a globalisation trend, while the other tended towards closing itself in ethnocentric, self-sufficient concepts. We could say that the everyday culture in Croatia is rather “universal” and “global”: average Croatian citizen thinks that Barilla pasta and Lotto tennis shoes guarantee her personal integration with Europe. Moreover, she shows affinity for actual globalisation and multicultural trends - she eats Chinese food, drives a Japanese car, drinks Coca-Cola and Australian wines. Such citizen is certainly not the ideal reader of the above-mentioned Hrvatsko slovo. She reads Rushdie and Kureishi, appreciates European films, and goes crazy to music from Buena Vista Social Club. But what about the average Croatian artist or cultural worker? She lives in the gap between her desires and means, between her knowledge and the circumstances in which she has to work. Inadequate professional conditions have forced a considerable number of younger people to leave the country during the nineties, in search of better
working conditions elsewhere. Cinematographers, dancers, comic artists, musicians, opera singers, artists – all those whose particular artistic skill is not dependant on the language [13] have relatively quickly and successfully adopted to new, mostly multicultural environments, such as Prague, Amsterdam or the United States.

The question of cultural national identity and its preservation/expression through cultural production is increasingly becoming a focus of theoretical discussions about the phenomenon of multiculturality and effects of globalisation on national cultures. Croatian culture in the nineties has been burdened by the heritage of the past and the ingrained idea that it was precisely the culture that preserved and passed on the idea of Croatian statehood, the inner essence of Croatian nation, through the long centuries. These long centuries without a state in the legal sense of the word have contributed to mythologisation of the cultural sphere as the privileged medium for passing on the national essence, thus saddling a great part of contemporary Croatian cultural production with the issues of the past. The Croatian culture never had the luxury of having to deal only with itself, its subject matters, questions of poetics and aesthetics. It always had to have the greater Purpose: preserving the Language, rescuing the History, constituting the Nation. The extent to which these issues still, however unconsciously, hamper even the youngest generations of artists and authors almost boggles the mind. The official criticism of the nineties has found itself unable to forgive the youngest generation for their interest in trivial themes, genre models... constantly insisting on internalised demands that each cultural product must deal with issues of importance for the whole community, with big topics that concern the nation as a whole, as if we are still living in old, but-not-so-good epic times [14].

In my opinion, the cultural identity is not based on national identity in the sense of ethnic affiliation. The cultural identity is not the end result of unifying ideas and minimising differences - be they cultural, ethnic, linguistic, poetic, aesthetic – on the contrary, it is shaped by these ideas connecting, storing, intertwining and coexisting. In any case, Croatian cultural identity has from its very beginning in the late Middle Ages consisted of diverse elements, of different cultural, religious and linguistic influences. The oldest Croatian literature is rightfully described as trilingual (Old Slavic, Croatian, Latin) and trialphabetic (Latin, Cyrillic and Glagolitic alphabets). Later on, Italian, German and Hungarian influences also left their mark. This fact makes the demands of contemporary “traditionalists” for an ethnically and religiously pure Croatian culture even more unbelievable. Like many other things in Croatian reality, this neoconservative call for tradition is fake, and the tradition thus construed is really a falsified tradition [15], whose external orderliness and superficial unity stand in the way of critical examination of cultural heritage, which should be conducted through a lively, open dialogue with the present.

Still, the internal multiculturality in the nineties has survived in the constant tension between the regions, which could not be subdued. The regions of Istria and Dalmatia expressed their diversity and uniqueness both culturally and politically against the background of the unifying national matrix. These tensions were frequently highly conflictive. Only the region of Slavonia, due to long-term immediate war threat, has suppressed the expression of this cultural uniqueness.

One of the effects of globalisation process in the world is the increasing concern and interest for and in local and regional identity, and we can recognise this effect in the
striving of Istrian and Dalmatian regions to achieve a certain degree of autonomy, which should not be confused with the political ideas of separatism. This process involves a lessening of national feelings towards the national state and proportional strengthening of national feelings tied to the local community. [16] The process of “localisation” of national identity takes place in confluence with the general process of singularisation of identity in contemporary times, with the disappearance of “big stories” of history and the collapse of totalitarian ideologies [17]. Their place has been taken by the individual entitled to her own story and the right of the local community to establish its own identity. The function of local identity is not necessarily in conflict with the sense of national identity: they can coexist, or, alternatively, the local identity can fill the void left by the lessening of influence of suprалocal, national identity [18].

Privatisation and the market: Cultural institutions as social security

The process of privatisation of ownership in Croatia is one of the main elements of economic transition in Croatia. In the socialist system, the majority of companies were under so-called social ownership, which means that there were no titular owners, no holders of ownership - not even the State. In the first stage of transition, which lasted until June 1992, a relatively small number of state companies were privatised, while the rest became the property of the state, managed by the Croatian Development Fund. The only completely privatised part of the cultural sector in this stage were publishing houses, because they were closest to typical commercial enterprises. Everything else - theatres, museums, cultural monuments - has been left out of the privatisation process and is still owned by the state, individual cities or counties. The Law on Privatisation did not take into account the distinctive features of cultural enterprises and possible ill effects of privatisation in the cultural sector. For that reason, the privatisation of publishing houses ended very badly: most of the big publishing houses were ruined during the transformation of ownership, and the network of bookshops was devastated. It soon became apparent that the publishing activity in a linguistically isolated country with a small reading population requires continued and significant help from the state, particularly where more ambitious publishing projects are concerned, such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias, continuous work on translation. The Commercial Court has registered around 400 private publishers in Croatia during the nineties, but only around a hundred are really involved with publishing. They barely keep themselves afloat, and the printing runs are extremely low: 500-1000 for domestic poetry and translations of theoretical literature from the humanities field, up to 2000-3000 copies for so-called commercial fiction and “best-sellers”.

The second sector where all the worst elements of privatisation (corruption, political pressure during sales, partnership deals…) came into play is the film sector. Croatian cinema is probably the weakest field of cultural and artistic activities in the nineties: the irregular privatisation has destroyed its technical infrastructure (the case of “Jadran-film” is the perfect example), and politics has directly dictated the selection of screenplays and filmmakers who will get the funding for the film. Naturally, the emphasis was placed on the priorities of “national unity” and “historical spectacles”, i.e., those films that the ruling party could use for direct ideological propaganda. [19]

After disastrous experiences with publishing and film sectors, the process of privatisation...
in the cultural fields was completely stopped, and no legal mechanisms or legal framework were designed to guarantee successful transformation of ownership, or at least to anticipate and block in advance the negative effects of privatisation. For ten years, we have waited in vain for the Law on Book Publishing or establishment of the Film Institute, where experts could deal with ensuring professional production conditions for filmmaking. On the other hand, during this same period a series of private initiatives was registered regarding the galleries and theatres: many private galleries were opened, and private theatre companies were founded. Their survival is threatened by the fact that the state can co-finance only their declared cultural activity, while the cultural institutions owned by the state get the funding for their programs and the money for employees’ salaries and the so-called overhead expenses (utilities, electricity, maintenance etc.). Sadly, more than two thirds of the funding that the state or the town pays for the public cultural institutions goes towards covering the cost of salaries and other overhead expenses, while only between 25% (at best) and 10% (at worst) of the state subsidy goes to the programme of the institution. This data clearly shows that no conditions exist to ensure fair competition between privately and publicly owned cultural enterprises in Croatia, although this is a necessity for establishment of free market and free exchange of goods and services.

One of the important issues that makes the discussions on the free cultural market (very similar to the science market) more difficult is the issue of social security of cultural workers. There is a good deal of resistance to the possibility of revising the existing rights (e.g. the actor’s employment is “permanent”, meaning that it guarantees the employment in the same theatre from the moment of graduation from the Academy of Dramatic Arts to retirement). This resistance is partly due to a sense of social justice and security inherited from socialism, and partly a consequence of the growing social insecurity in the entire society, as well as the visible economic marginalisation of the cultural sphere. Similar situation exists in other transition countries of Central Europe [20], with the stratification between artists according to the way they find employment and sources of income in the social context: most, unfortunately, feel disappointment that the state “no longer cares for them”. Only a minority considers the new conditions of cultural production, without censorship and political interference a challenge and a chance to gain independence - in the artistic, financial, creative and existential sense of the word.

The media and the culture: cases and incidents

The status of culture in the Croatian society in the nineties is revealed through the way the media, both the state media and the so-called independent media, treat cultural events and programs. The most distinctive feature of the media presentation of culture in the nineties (continuing to this day) is an almost exclusive treatment of culture as a (political) case or a (scandalous) incident. Culture is present in the media primarily as a politically charged event, and if it is possible to further spice up the case with the private, scandalous details pertaining to some public figure, that is viewed as an added bonus. Cultural topics can get a significant space in daily papers or political weeklies, including even a prestigious interview form, but not because of their inherent aesthetic value. Whatever attention they get is due to political circumstances tied to a certain event or a person. The interest in what is “private” has often crossed the boundaries of journalistic ethics, pandering to the lowest appetites of the readership, hungry for “tabloid” scandals.
Actors, poets, writers, painters were given platform in the media in accordance with their publicly proclaimed political opinions and the nature of these opinions. Since the media in the nineties was polarised politically into, to put it simply, two groups, the so called “nation-building” media and the independent media, the cultural topics treated in the media were also roughly divided into two groups, according to a twofold criteria: the nation-building media showcased the nation-building artists and representational manifestations, while the independent media ensured a space for the so-called independent intellectuals and artists who did not support the CDU government, choosing instead to criticise it openly.

And what happened to those who found themselves in between? There was no place for them in the public arena. The nineties did not allow for nuance and the possibility of some kind of interspace. The tension between the ruling party and the opposition grew to such a degree during the last three years that practically every artist/intellectual had to state her political bent directly and clearly. It was believed that those who remain silent or “undeclared” implicitly support the ruling party.

One of the negative effects of such polarisation on the cultural scene was reflected in the loss of clearly defined critical principles and criteria. The same thing we condemned when CDU did it in the early nineties, namely the promotion of worthless artistic works in the name of the “nation-building” and “patriotic” message, sadly became the norm with the opposition media as well, this time in the late nineties. Independent, opposition media afforded a lot of publicity to the work of those individuals who expressed their political opposition to the ruling party, and the aesthetic and artistic criteria were left behind.

This situation, conspicuous in the cultural magazines as well, was best described by the philosopher and political scientist Zarko Puhovski, speaking during the public discussion on the media and the culture. According to him, the criticism in Croatia has become “artificial” (an end to itself), while the artistic production has bowed its head before political dictates. If art dealt with art, and criticism used its analytical power to examine the contextual circumstances, ideological burden and the political implications of works of art, we would find ourselves in a far healthier place.

Footnotes

1. The notion of "culture" in this text encompasses three groups of meaning: the culture in the narrower sense of space in which artistic and cultural production takes place, culture in the broader sense of spiritual "improvement" (a term inherited from the previous, socialist period), the culture in the broadest sense of the word, denoting a value system.

2. Vjeran Zuppa: Notebook. This paper represents a theoretical outline of the new cultural policy, based on the principles of autonomous culture and art, decentralisation of decision-making and financing of culture. It also lists the anticipated priorities of cultural policy in the next period, stressing the importance of modernising culture. The document took shape during a series of discussions held at the City Council of Social Democratic Party. The author is a prominent theatrologist and scholar, now a Dean of Academy of Dramatic Arts. Zarez, January 2000.


5. Politically speaking, the boundary is usually drawn at the unfolding of events of 1971, when, by Tito's decision, the Croatian republican government led by Dr. Savka Dabcevic-Kucar was disbanded. Creatively speaking, the energy accumulated during this period persisted for several years more.

6. Infamous prison in Communist Yugoslavia, primarily geared for political prisoners. The first wave of prisoners is tied to 1948 and the break of Yugoslav Communist Party with Stalin. Goli otok later became the subject of many prison memoirs.


8. In the Report, this tendency is linked with the fourth stage of postwar cultural policy stages (according to Volkerling's typology), whose main feature is "fostering a sense of national unity", chiefly through spectacularisation. (cf. 28)

9. One of the more famous statements from this period came from Ivan Milas (CDU), the so-called Keeper of the state seal, who asked in the middle of the Parliament: "How much for a kilogram of brains?", answering immediately: "One kilo of brain - 2.5 Deutsche marks." The political populism was expressed on a daily basis in the aggressive form of utter and complete anti-intellectualism.

10. Hrvatsko slovo has been published since 1994, when it was launched by the Croatian Writers' Association with the enormous financial help from the state. Its purpose was to serve as a sort of "spiritual" counterbalance to the activities of Croatian P.E.N. and the independent magazine Vijenac, which was launched by Matica Hrvatska in 1993, under the guidance of it then president Vlado Gotovac, later the founder and leader of the Liberal Party. Hrvatsko slovo has repeatedly resorted to racist discourse and hate speech. Among other things, the magazine was financed by direct compulsory sale to the Ministry of Defense, and it was printed in the state-owned printing plant. Croatian Writers' Association has not been named as a publisher since 1999.

11. Zarez was started in 1999, after a group of editors and writers left Matica's Vijenac, due to political pressure and different forms of indirect and direct censorship. The conflict in Matica culminated when the managing council decided to ban the appearance of the photograph of Moslem prisoners in the Croatian war camp Dretelj on the covers of Branko Matan's war diary The Past is a Difficult Question. Zarez was started with the help of foreign foundations, and the intention of creating a public cultural space in which to shape a critical discourse and open discussions about all-important issues in society.


13. Even the acting stars of the eighties, Mira Furlan and Rade Serbedzija, and authors
Dubravka Ugresic and Slavenka Drakulic have managed - thanks to their remarkable talent - to gain prominence in the international market, despite the initial disadvantage of a foreign language. The language (or, in acting, speech) is a far more aggravating factor in adjusting to the environment where people write/speak/act in a different language.

14. The course of literature in the nineties is a good example: from the pathos of direct reactions to war, through autobiographical and documentary texts, to the constitution of genre literature at the end of the decade.

15. It is no accident that Dubravka Ugresic's book of essays has the word lie in the title: in The Culture of Lies, she discusses various ways in which the reality is falsified in contemporary Croatia.


17. The same process is apparent in the pluralisation of religions and religious beliefs in the West, and the increase in the number of sects, regardless of ethnic and/or religious affiliation.


19. Although not directly a part of the cultural field, the privatisation of the media, both the print and the electronic media, bears special mention. This is a sector where a huge number of suspicious privatisations took place, some of which are now undergoing criminal investigation. The most famous is the case of "Grupo d.o.o." which illustrates perfectly the collusion between politics and media in order to dominate the entire public sphere.


21. The term "nation-building", both as a noun and an adjective, appeared in the early nineties, as a sign for the semantic identification between the state and the specific ruling party (i.e. CDU). Whoever supported CDU was "nation-building", that is to say, they supported the Croatian state, while those who dared criticize CDU were automatically accused of being against the Croatian state, because no semantic distinction between state and the government was allowed, nor between the state and the homeland. Artists and intellectuals were also proclaimed "nation-building" - at least those who participated in the projects of so-called spiritual revival.

22. The discussion was held in the Croatian Journalists' Centre in February 2000. The transcript of the discussion was published in the biweekly magazine for cultural and social issues Zarez, March 2000.