



Europa eine Seele geben
A Soul for Europe
Une âme pour l'Europe

Forum Skopje – “A Soul for Europe”

4 – 6 April 2008 in the Parliament of FYR Macedonia

Berliner Konferenz

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Concluding note on proceedings by Simon Mundy

This is a personal report, rather than an official summary, and therefore it does not necessarily reflect the views of the organising partners, nor the other participants and speakers.

Context

The Forum Skopje followed on from a similar Forum held in Belgrade in the spring of 2007. Both marked stages in the process of extending the public debate on the role, significance and political place of culture and cultural operators that was initiated in Berlin in two conferences titled ‘A Soul for Europe’ in 2004 and 2006. Both Skopje and Belgrade (which will host a second meeting in October 2008) will inform the third Berlin event, scheduled for November this year. The organising partners were the Berlin based initiative “A Soul for Europe”, Felix Meritis Foundation Amsterdam, European Alliance Macedonia and Public Room Macedonia.

Forum Skopje brought together representatives of Macedonian civil society, the cultural sector, city and national politics and government with others from the Balkans and European level NGOs and EU institutions. The intention was to create a modern public dialogue in an area which has up to now been for the most part confined to local or sub-regional local meetings. Representation was widespread but incomplete, with little or no participation from neighbouring countries except Serbia. The languages of the event were English and Slavic Macedonian.

The event took place in the immediate aftermath of the rejection of Macedonia's bid to become a member of NATO, vetoed at NATO's Bucharest summit by Greece. The sense of national indignation was real but the Forum was clearly also used as an opportunity for political participants to demonstrate their pro-nationalist feelings. At times it became difficult to keep discussions focussed on the matters in the programme. These included the ‘implementation of culture as a driving force for European development’, ‘European responsibilities for local and regional actors’, ‘cultural diversities and social cohesion in South-eastern Europe’, and ‘debate as an intermediary in culture and politics.’

Kuratorium

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Göran Blomqvist
Erhard Busek
Jérôme Clément
Jacques Delors
Dimitris Dimitriadis
Dario Disegni
Timothy Garton Ash
Hans-Dietrich Genscher
Manfred Gentz
Bronislaw Geremek
Meglana Kuneva
Catherine Lalumière
Carlo Ossola
Oana Radu
Anne-Marie Sigmund
Emílio Rui Vilar
Richard von Weizsäcker

Initiatoren

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Roland Berger
Hans-Erich Bilges
Volker Hassemer (Sprecher)
Nele Hertling (Sprecher)
John C. Kornblum
Wolf Lepenies
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Steering Committee

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Jacques Toubon
Helga Trüpel

Projekträger

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Emerging themes

From both the contributions of platform speakers and participants a set of critical themes dominated discussions.

1. *Expectations of the cultural sector in relation to national and municipal government*

There is a real sense of disparity in understanding between those in Macedonia's independent cultural sector (by which is meant those who do not have salaries paid directly by the national or city authorities), institutional officials and politicians and administrators. The independent cultural sector expects government at all levels to provide space and finance for open debate, radical arts and international mobility. State institutions believe that they have a right to come first in the queue for limited and often declining resources – as they did in pre-independence times. Politicians, at present in a particularly fervent mood of nation building, expect the cultural sector to regard national representation and celebration as their principle duty in return for state patronage. Meanwhile those officials asked to administrate the system (even young and academically qualified ones) have little experience of dealing with non-governmental organisations and initiatives. The result is a considerable degree of mistrust and unrealistic expectations on all sides. At its heart is the problem that Macedonia simply does not have the economic strength to finance both a strong set of centrally directed institutions and a thriving arts sector independent of official money for more than 60% of its income. There is equally no consensus as to how to move forward – either by increasing the flexibility of national and city institutions, or by giving more stable support to the independent sector.

2. *European expectations of the Macedonian and Balkan cultural sectors*

Europe – in the form of the European Commission, Parliament and networks, looks to the cultural sector to provide an intellectual and creative context for progressive politics, both in Macedonia and the region as a whole. While there have been partial successes, particularly in those Balkan states (Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria) that have recently joined the EU, there is a feeling in many parts of Balkan Europe that national recognition is more important than European integration and mobility. It is the task of such Forums as those in Skopje and Belgrade, therefore, to provide an opportunity for those with wider interests to be seen as contributing constructively to a less introvert future. Equally it is important that the participants from elsewhere in Europe establish a sense of normal engagement; the feeling that, whatever the history of the 1990s, as we come to the end of the first decade of the 21st Century Balkan people are 'just' Europeans like the rest of us – each with a particular but not unique set of problems.

3. *The capacity of government to deliver financial support and imaginative reform*

There is suspicion in the cultural sector that ministerial and city officials are living in the past, using its rhetoric to defend the status quo. Governments everywhere do this, of course. It is rare for a Minister to come out publicly and admit that things are in a mess. Nonetheless it only takes a glance at Macedonia's cultural infrastructure to see that key parts of it are clearly failing. It requires not only resources but the imagination and political flair to reform the system for allocating them. Macedonia has begun this process several times in the last ten years but it seems there is not the conviction to carry it through or the skill to present modernisation properly to the public. Again, this is a painful



process that has been carried out in many small former-communist countries from Estonia to Slovenia. Macedonia is in danger of being the last in the line.

4. *The role of other civil society organisations in cultural life*

There seems to be some confusion in Macedonian political circles as to the difference between the various types of non-governmental organisations. Single issue pressure groups, social improvement organisations, professional networks and not-for-profit cultural enterprises seem to be lumped all together in the official mind as 'them'; outsider groups whose main aim is to disrupt the convenient routine of governmental institutions. In fact, these various NGO types can be both the vehicle for innovation and the demonstration of the transparency of society in the new Balkan states. Some social organisations (particularly those working with children, the elderly, the environmental and inter-communal dialogue) can be important in the delivery of the arts. Equally, independent and institutional cultural organisations can play a much wider part in social cohesion (not just national pride) than present decision makers seem to recognise.

5. *Mobility and the barriers to local participation at the European level*

It is clearly not enough for European Union Member States and the EU political institutions to expect Balkan cultural operators to act as progressive intermediaries if the visa systems restrict their mobility to the extent that they are effectively imprisoned within their own borders. Without the ability to collaborate freely with their professional colleagues in other parts of Europe they find themselves welcomed by the European cultural sector on the one hand and on the other rejected by consular officials as being a threat to EU borders. This farce has now been carried out since 1990. Yet when restrictions are removed it is clear that freedom causes far less problems than slammed doors. The EU must find a simple and inexpensive way for all Balkan cultural operators to be able to travel and pursue their professional business without being constantly treated as potential illegal immigrants. It is counter-productive, illogical and, for the individuals concerned, deeply insulting.

Conclusions

1. In Macedonia there needs to be a lasting and far more constructive dialogue between the cultural sector and government.
2. Europe needs to match its integrationist rhetoric with action to help professional people, not just officials, operate on equal terms with their contemporaries in the EU. It is no longer acceptable to treat Balkan cultural actors as second class Europeans.
3. Regional networks should be started and financially supported so that culture can act as a bridge between the fractured political entities of the Balkans.
4. Macedonia (perhaps with the help of the EU) needs to train its officials and politicians in modern cultural policy management; to have a much more flexible idea of how cultural institutions and projects can be organised. Its governance structures are clearly inadequate.



5. Cultural organisations must not be the hostages of any political doctrine or faction and politicians must not expect them to be.

Follow-up

The Forum Belgrade later this year should be used to move forward on all these points, in particular the formation of a lasting dialogue mechanism and a regional cultural network. These initiatives can also be brought to European attention at the Culture Action Europe General Assembly and the Third Berlin Conference later in the autumn.

In the medium term the European Commission, perhaps through the Stability Pact structure, should join forces with Felix Meritis and Berliner Konferenz to appoint an external evaluator and mediator who could act as a catalyst for reform. He or she would also help to arrange in-service training for officials, members of Parliament and Ministers.