

CROSS POINTS BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND CULTURAL POLICIES

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*2nd UNICA Conference University, Culture and the City
Sofia, May 2017*

The relations between academic research and policies in the sphere of culture suffer from a number of problems and deficiencies. This leads to significant negative consequences such as instrumentalization of culture for the purposes of economic and social development, formalization of cultural policies and introducing unmodified managerial model of governing this sphere, without considering its peculiarities and characteristics. This report will represent the possibilities for cross points between these two areas, through concrete examples for research initiatives on local level, mainly in Sofia, that has influenced the local cultural policies.

But first of all I should outline three main abruptions in the field of applied cultural policy research that define the relations in this area.

The first of these is between the institutional infrastructure and the knowledge framework.

The relations and interconnections between research and information institutions are predetermined mainly by the existent knowledge framework, or research paradigm, which includes the models of knowledge organization and management. These models, for its part, are defined by the concrete historical, political and cultural context of a given society. The knowledge framework marks out the important themes and problems to be set as research objects, as well as the necessary information for them. The knowledge framework cannot always be found explicitly as an academic, administrative or political document.

The institutional infrastructure, for its part, includes all the institutions and organizations, involved in the process of gathering, processing and analysis of information in the sphere of culture, as well as the institutions conducting specialized researches.

The knowledge framework and the institutional infrastructure should be functioning in sync with each other, whereas each reform in one part should inevitably find reflection in the other. They both have relation to the problems of data gathering, their possible interpretations and uses in the cultural political debate.

Namely the lack of such a framework, or the mismatch between the framework and the institutional infrastructure in many cases leads to inefficiency of the informational provision, which finds expression in data overproduction, overlapping of researches, conducted by different institutions, difficulties in data analysis and interpretation, and so on.

An example of this mismatch can be given: in contemporary cultural policies an increasing importance is given to the contribution of culture to economic and social development. This means growing importance of economic and social indicators and data. But at the same time national statistics in Bulgaria does not gather such data. Because of this it's hard to determine how successful are the reform measures undertaken, concerning reaching higher economic effectiveness of cultural organizations.

The second abruption concerns the torn relations between academic and non-academic researches

The reasons for this problem can be traced in few main directions. First of all – academic researches are considered too theoretical, conceptual, using specialized terminology, indirectly linked to concrete mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which policies for culture are designed and applied. The link between these academic research and concrete structure and organization of the cultural political process is hard to find.

Secondly, it could be pointed that the most of non-academic studies in the sector are provoked by the necessity to defend the public investment in culture. In this sense they are often used for the purposes of advocacy and are thus involved in the ideologically burdened debate, practically serving to legitimate one ideology or another. The academic researches on their part are questioning the very value basis of the dominant ideologies and from this point of view they could hardly be used for the purposes of advocacy and lobbying.

The inadequate inclusion of the academic structures in the process of informing cultural policies leads to lack of widely shared definitions, conceptual frameworks and research methodologies. On its own part it leads to production of defective “non-academic” research production and becomes one of the main reasons for disparaging attitude towards so called „grey literature”.

In addition to that there is a specific problem, concerning the copy rights and publications of the researches. Significant part of the research texts, produced for the purpose of informing cultural policies, remain unpublished, or published in very small circulation with limited distribution. Often this is due to the fact, that these researches may contain confidential data, or the results may be in some degree unsatisfactory for the contractors. In many cases the state or municipal structures of the public authority insist on keeping the research results for internal use, while universities aim at developing and widening knowledge, by publishing results and making them accessible to wider audience. This may be a significant problem, obstructing the productive relations between academic circles and political or administrative structures, as well as a serious obstacle to widening the cultural debate.

The third abruption concerns the interrelations and influences between research and political agenda

The so called «evidence-based policy» pretends to base its main aims on facts and evidences, generated by empirical researches and studies. But shouldn't we consider the possibility that the so called «evidence-based policy» predetermines the results of the researches, in order to justify the preliminary designed goals, and to legitimate political programs, thus forcing the researches to gather data on development of criteria outside the cultural sphere? In other words: do the evidences set the political agenda, or the political agenda sets the evidences?

A clearly standing out trend in western cultural policy researches (especially those coming from Great Britain, Australia and United States) is the study, identification and evaluation of the economic impact of cultural policies and programs. In a lot of studies can be traced the consistantly disputed thesis, that arts and cultural heritage are, by presumption, “losing sectors”, and providing proofs for the significant economic and social effects, resulting from their functioning.

This whole debate leads to the reasonable question if the arts and culture are means for economic and social ends, or the economy is a mean for artistic and cultural ends? Starting from this question, Amartya Sen¹ works out two different viewpoints to the development of the contemporary world. The first one, influenced by the economic growth, sees the development as fast and sustainable growth of the Gross Domestic Product per capita of the population. Sen calls this viewpont “opulence view of development”. In this approach the values and culture have no foundational place.

The second, opposite viewpoint determines the development as a process, leading to enhancement of freedom to all, involved to pursue whatever objectives they value. The development here is defined as “effective freedom”. In this approach the culture has a significant meaning, as a factor influencing the value formation and defining the personal and social development directions.

The choice between alternative visions for development is of course a political problem, not a research problem. But such an explicit statement of the alternatives does not allow the culture economization trend to keep on pretending for value neutrality, concerning the content of cultural programs and products. Many authors reasonably see in it legitimating the neoliberal paradigm, affirming the market as the single platform for value production, and affirming the principle of state withdrawal of the cultural sphere.

The tension between academic research and political agenda finds a concrete expression in the tension between research efforts and evaluation activities, often assigned to a same institution (the situation is common to the research and analysis departments at the executive authorities structures).

¹ Sen, Amartya A Matter of Choice, The UNESCO Courier, - Special Issue, November 2009, pp.33-34

Instead of prioritizing and following the significant intrinsic values, the political agenda predetermines the research agenda, and puts the accent on the instrumental value of culture. Instrumental values' research and evaluation is hard enough in methodology terms. But in spite of its chances of success, it cannot by itself bring arguments, convincing enough to prefer cultural sphere to others, in terms of economic return.

The research of the cultural intrinsic value is the one, that could provide convincing arguments for the “exclusiveness” and the “unique qualities” of this sphere. At the end – policies for culture are not economic, neither social policies.

Ultimately a significant part of the cultural policy applied researches turn out to be charged with the task to justify and legitimate certain policies, and not to serve as a source for designing ones. Researching does not precede, but follows the goal setting, which is based on ideological ground. There could hardly be a mechanism to completely neutralize this tendency, but ensuring academic freedom and encouraging independent researches could offer a possibility to form a different and critical perspectives.

What is the situation in Bulgaria? On national level there is no institution, directly engaged with informing cultural policies. That is the reason why there are no data bases on the development of culture in Bulgaria during the last 20 years. Statistical data, gathered by the National statistics Institute are extremely limited and insufficient to accomplish serious and thorough analyses on the development of cultural sphere. These shortcomings lead to a particular state of ignorance in designing and implementation of policies, which dooms them to repeatedly reproduce the same actions, and make same mistakes, without knowing or remembering the accumulated experience. Significant example in this respect is the numerous unsuccessful attempts to elaborate national strategy for development of Bulgarian culture.

In this situation the universities and academic research are the only alternative for providing reliable information, analyses and independent view to what is happening in cultural sphere. Unfortunately, on national level in Bulgaria, the relations between academic and political structures in the sphere of culture are extremely fragmented.

Despite the gloomy picture on national level, there are numerous examples and practices of interrelations between academic researches and policies on municipal level. They have led to significant changes in the political and administrative actions on local level. I will represent here three concrete examples of academic studies that influenced local cultural policies.

The first example is a research on the Cultural calendar of the Sofia municipality, accomplished in 2010 by Foundation for Urban Projects and Research – an organization, comprised of academic researchers from Sofia University.

The municipal Cultural calendars in Bulgaria in its essence represent a particular kind of funding programs, directed to support cultural events, realized on the municipal territory all year round.

They are instrument for implementing local cultural policy, inherited by the socialist period, and in this sense they carry part of the negatives of this epoch – they are dominated by political directives, they lack transparency, accountability and efficiency, as well as mechanisms of control and ensuring effectiveness in public resources spending.

The Cultural calendar of Sofia municipality is one of the largest funding programs for arts and culture in the country, with annual budget of approximately 2 million leva (about 1 million euro). It has a complex structure, which encompasses a number of different groups of events, as well as few smaller programs.

The research that I'm referring here was conducted in 2010, and included a documental study, a survey among the organizations supported by the Calendar, a number of interviews and media research.

Some of the main conclusions, coming up from the research are:

1. Cultural events Calendar cannot be examined and analyzed as an integral entity, because it is not an entity, but more a mechanical sum of events, projects and programs. The separate elements of the Calendar have different strengths and weaknesses and their problems should be examined individually.
2. The key problem of the Calendar is not only the lack of holistic vision, but also the wrong reception of it as another financing program (similar to Municipal Culture Program), where all the projects and programs, that do not fit anywhere else, could be “settled”.
3. The main difference between Cultural Calendar and Culture Program is that the Calendar is “grants in aid” and the Culture Program is “project financing”. But namely the objective of the “grants in aid” is not clear.
4. In a wider sense the problems of the Calendar are rooted in the outdated understanding for the role of Culture Department, which is still accepted as organizer of cultural events, and its monitoring, coordination and information functions are strongly neglected and underdeveloped.
5. Cultural Calendar could be turned into powerful instrument for carrying through the municipal policies for culture and for intensifying the cultural life in Sofia, but for this purpose radical changes are needed, starting from clear division of its different parts, defining new objectives of the separate programs, strengthened internal control, modified system for inclusion and exclusion of events, etc.

One of the main problems of the Calendar was the fact, that although it was one of the most significant funding programs for arts and culture in the country, it was comparatively unknown as such among the cultural organizations and the funds distribution did not happen according clear enough, open and democratic procedures. The mechanisms of Calendar composition do have influence on its content – which was eclectic, heterogeneous, and mechanically

reproductive from one year to another. Those are typical defects of all the municipal cultural calendars in the country, and they exist in all of the 265 municipalities in Bulgaria.

The research on the Cultural calendar of Sofia municipality clearly demonstrated these deficiencies, and at the same time it formulated a number of important recommendations concerning the construction mechanisms for the Cultural calendar – the necessity of open and clear procedures, the necessity of drawing priorities and methods for monitoring and evaluation on the content of cultural events, included in the Calendar.

As a result of this research and its recommendations, Sofia municipality significantly changed the mechanisms of Cultural calendar composition and announced an open procedure for application, thus opening the program towards all the interested organizations. This act led to more possibilities for inclusion of diverse organizations in Cultural calendar, improved selection procedure, and at the end – representing better quality cultural content for the citizens of Sofia. Since 2011 an annual monitoring is conducted on the events, included in the Calendar. The monitoring report was made public this year and can be found on the web-page of Sofia Municipality.

The second especially positive example for the productive relations between research and policy in culture is the launching of the Strategy for development of culture in Sofia municipality – the Strategy “Sofia – Creative Capital 2012 - 2020”², adopted by the Municipal Council in the end of 2011.

The Strategy was worked out by a team, including experts in different cultural areas, who were – one way or another – engaged with different researches on culture locally in Sofia. The team included representatives of Sofia University, University of National and World Economy, National Academy of Music as well as representatives of cultural and civil organizations. The process was led by Sofia Development Association. As a result of their researches, the participants in the main team have found out some main key problems in this area, which were laid as priorities in the Strategy. Among them were the following:

ACCESS TO CULTURE with main aim Sofia to become creative city, where each citizen, no matter of their sex, age, ethnic origin or social status – should have access to diverse cultural products and opportunities to develop their potential, through active participation in creative activities, including in virtual space. This priority was set in the strategy, based of the research conclusion that a serious part of the capital population has restricted access to culture.

CULTURE AND HUMAN CAPITAL with main aim Sofia to become an open city – a live laboratory, where people experiment and develop their knowledge, skills and creative abilities, based on mutual respect. This priority was chosen on the base of research conclusion, concerning the comparatively low level of cultural literacy among the general population of the city.

² http://www.sofiacouncil.bg/content/docs/c_f25606.pdf

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CHANGING CITY with the main aim to transform the cultural heritage in a factor for sustainable urban and regional development and cultural capital, that possesses economic and social value, and at the same time enriches the opportunities for interaction with contemporary arts. This priority was defined based on the research conclusion that the cultural heritage of the city is very diverse and not well socialized – it comprises of ancient and medieval heritage, but also controversial heritage of industrial era and socialism. All of this cultural wealth needs special attention that was addressed in the strategy.

SOFIA – CITY OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY with the main aim detection and use of the arts, cultural and creative industries potential for the city integrated development, guaranteed by targeted municipal policy and generating wealth (economy growth, employment) through development of the creative economy in the city. This priority was chosen because of a research, proving the economic significance of the creative sector in the capital.

EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN GLOBAL CULTURAL PROCESSES with main aim turning Sofia into hospitable environment for attracting audiences and participants outside Bulgaria into Sofia cultural and creative life, for cooperative creation of cultural products on Sofia territory and for hosting international cultural events. This priority was based on the research conclusion for comparative isolation of Bulgarian cultural life from international tendencies.

The Strategy for development of culture in Sofia municipality is an extremely positive example of collaboration between political, academic and civil sector. The strategy was based on actual problems identified in the cultural sector of the city and it proposes adequate and compliant to available resources decisions.

The third example is connected to academic researches, conducted in the last two years, on different municipal funding programs for culture on competitive principle. These programs are comparatively new for Bulgarian context instrument for supporting innovative cultural events on municipal level. Unlike Cultural calendars they have open and clear procedures, as well as more clear focus on independent and innovative events. Such programs exist in a few municipalities in the country (around 20 of the all 265), but they have proven their potential to encourage the fragile independent sector in the arts.

At the same time most of the programs studied have similar problems, for which common decisions could be implemented. These problems include:

- Isolation from the other municipal, national and European programs and funding instruments in the sphere of arts and culture. This isolation has at least two significant aspects: territorial (most programs allow only local candidates) and thematic (lack of coordination between themes and priorities of other existing programs, which leads to overlapping activities or lack of support for specific activities, such as researches in the

sphere of culture and arts). Another significant aspect is the isolation from the other public sectors, such as education, science, youth activities, social sphere, integration and so on.

- Unclear regulations in determining the sizes of the budgets in separate programs. At the moment they vary significantly – between 10 thousand euro (Veliko Tarnovo) and 750 thousand euro (Sofia). The opportunities for attracting additional resources outside the municipal subsidy are extremely limited.
- The process of project proposals evaluation is also problematic, as well as the constitution of the expert commissions for project evaluation. In many cases these commissions are composed by the representatives of the municipal council or municipal administration. Independent experts are rarely predominate majority in these commissions. Positive exclusions from the main tendency are the municipalities of Sofia and Varna, where the evaluation is conducted mainly by outer, politically independent experts.
- Most of the programs suffer from insufficient administrative capacity of the candidates as well as of the expert and administrators in separate municipalities.
- Another problem is the lack of enough publicity and transparency in the process of applying and evaluation as well as in the process of following popularization and publicity of the supported projects results.

As a general problem for the future of these programs was determined the lack of sustainability concerning the development of individual cultural organizations and audiences on local level.

As a result of the studies completed and the recommendations proposed some of the programs rules and procedures were changed in direction of more transparency and accountability in spending public resources for culture. Very recently Sofia municipality published the monitoring report on the Cultural calendar, which was not a common practice until now, although such reports were prepared annually in the last five years.

The represented examples of cooperation between research and policy have proven their efficiency in the political and administrative process, but unfortunately they are more exceptions than a systematic practice on municipal, as well as on national level in Bulgaria. The political authorities in many cases regard such researches as potential threat, because of the possibility of critical reflections.

Unfortunately this kind of research are somewhat neglected in the academic circles too – because of their tight commitment to mechanisms for designing and implementing policies, and because of their too local focus. The result from this is the limited opportunities for funding and publishing the results, especially in approved international editions.

Improving the connections and relationships between research and policy needs rethinking in both sides of the significance and necessity of ensuring adequate cultural policies informing, as well as rethinking the role and opportunities of academic researchers to influence the policies.

The interrelations between research and policies in cited examples have led to very important change: developing new procedures and mechanisms for implementing cultural policies on local level and improving the ways of public funds allocation. The new procedures and mechanisms correspond in higher degree to the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability, efficiency and ensuring better access to culture. It is worthwhile to invest more actively on a national, not only municipal, level in intensifying the relations between academic research and public policies in culture. But this intensification needs the development of strategy and defining a common academic and political agenda. It needs of course ensuring adequate resources for conducting research.

But it has the potential to lead to more “effective freedom” in the creative development of our societies.