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## *On cultural advocacy*

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by Dragan Klaic

***Advocacy is systematic voicing of key interests of a specific group, constituency or sector to the public opinion leaders and decision makers with the aim to convince them to implement change.***

A clear distinction should be made between advocacy, that applies to non-commercial causes, and lobbying, deployed by various industries and commercial interests, such as tobacco, alcohol, construction, trucking, weaponry. In some languages there are no adequate terms to make this distinction, however.

Advocacy applies to such causes as human rights, gender emancipation and equality, ecology, public health, animal protection and non-commercial cultural production, whose institutional resources, collectives and individuals are organized in effective platforms that mark the activist side of the civil society. With the growing power of the regions and cities, advocacy platforms appear on those levels of public authority as well. Hence local culture alliances, for instance, and other advocacy organizations voicing some local cause, without being merely a local chapter of a national advocacy organization.

### **European level of advocacy**

Most advocacy organizations are on the national level but with the advancement of the European integration process and the growing remit of the European Union with the Lisbon Constitutional Treaty (2009), there is a visible growth in Brussels of advocacy organizations, in parallel to some 20.000 commercial lobbies. Among influential European advocacy organizations in culture, one would mention:

- Culture Action Europe (cultural dimension of European integration, European cultural policy)

- Europa Nostra (European dimension of cultural heritage)
- Nemo (European museums)
- EBLIDA (libraries)
- European Music Office
- Opera Europe
- PEARLE (performing arts employers)
- European Festival Association
- European Producers Club (independent cinema).

All those organizations usually have beside advocacy some other objectives and tasks, such as to stimulate information exchange, professional discourse and cooperation among their members. Their membership consists of cultural organizations and national cultural associations that have in turn their own membership, and some admit individual members alongside the institutional ones.

### **Advocacy in transition countries**

In the cultural landscape of post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, there is still a visible lack of effective advocacy platforms. Representational infrastructure, inherited from the past system, consisting of traditional associations, set up per artistic discipline or cultural profession (writers, composers, visual artists...), have by and large become dysfunctional. Before 1989, their main role was the distribution of precious privileges to the artists (working spaces, apartments, stays in vacation residences and sanatoriums) and regulation of their social-economic status, in return for ideological loyalty of the members and their acceptance of the official political line of the authorities. In the transition period these inherited representational structures have sought to protect inherited privileges of their members, defended the imbalances and inequalities of the existing cultural infrastructure, advocated more public money for institutional culture but they have also acted as gatekeepers, blocking changes in cultural policy system. Many associations have become quite commercial, exploiting their real estate holdings through sublet. The Association of Russian Theater Workers (SDT) runs 7 ex-sanatoriums as hotels, and 3 cosmetic factories that used to make stage makeup, and sublets office space in some 80 "houses of actors" in various cities.

***The new SDT Creative Center in Moscow, built on tax free ground, has only 20% of space devoted to theater, the rest of the 8 floor building is leased commercially.***

Elsewhere similar associations became entrepreneurs or non-profit competitors of the NGOs, set up by their members and colleagues.

## **Economic crisis makes advocacy even more needed**

Numerous NGOs in culture, established in the last 20 years across Central and Eastern Europe, have become the most dynamic, propulsive, innovative and critical segment of the cultural scene in transition countries, best connected internationally via European networks, but still lacking advocacy platforms at home. This is not surprising since these NGOs are very fragile and continuously fight for sheer survival, so their activists have no time to invest in altruistic common causes.

With the onslaught of the protracted economic recession and subsequent radical budget reductions on all levels of the public spending, this entire segment of culture is under new pressures and might be wiped out as governments tend to eliminate the project subsidies first. Wherever para-governmental funds have been established to distribute project grants, their resources have been reduced. Public cultural institutions also suffer a certain percentage of subsidy reduction which makes them in turn even more inefficient and worsens their input/output ratio.

The crisis and its aftermath have created a set of circumstances that endanger and weaken all public culture, that is non-profit cultural production and distribution, while job losses, job insecurity and shrunk family budgets further reduce cultural consumption. Governments that for years, even in better economic climate, avoided on opportunistic grounds a reconstruction of the public cultural systems, now have no other tools at their disposal than budgetary reductions and do not dare to engage in far-reaching reforms that would anyhow be more effective with more rather than with less resources available. Cultural institutions and some NGOs are also paralyzed by fears for their future and shun activist engagement that would also involve a buildup of strong advocacy campaign and infrastructure. Nowhere in 20 countries, eligible for G. Soros Emergency Fund, set up with \$100 million, to alleviate the social and cultural consequences of the crisis in 2009, have cultural organizations created broader alliances and come up with proposals how to equip them for advocacy tasks and strengthen their connectivity with other social fields. This is a dramatic indication of a missing vision and sense of urgency among the culture professionals.

### **A tentative advocacy agenda**

In a few transition countries (Slovenia, Latvia, Hungary...) the leaders of some NGOs have made tentative efforts to initiate a structured and ongoing dialogue among them and thus nurture some trust and awareness of shared strategic interests, while remaining competitors for government support as well as for the public, media attention and sponsorship. There is a growing awareness that on the local and national level NGOs need to come together in order to advocate effectively the modernization of the cultural system that has undergone so far only cosmetic changes; to argue for the increase of the public subsidy volume for the NGOs and the improvement of the criteria and decision making procedures for their allocation by autonomous funds, working with peer review; to seek changes in fiscal, labor, and social security legislation that still takes a full-time, permanently employed worker as a norm – while most culture professionals have a career pattern marked by discontinuous engagements in various capacity, with public, private and non-profit employers and even multiple simultaneous or sequential employment status. Ultimately, the goal should be a

comprehensive overhaul of the entire cultural production and distribution system, to be based on the performance assessment and not on mere legislative status.

### **NGOs as advocacy pioneers**

Between a raising awareness and well conceived action there is a significant gap. And yet, advocacy mentality and infrastructure cannot be imposed from outside. Cultural operators need to get together, analyze the present circumstances and project them into the future; formulate a set of goals and specific objectives; identify the decision makers who should be the targeted; articulate concrete demands and proposals; set out a time line of a campaign; deploy resources and map a strategy; develop monitoring and evaluation tools and procedures. A mobilization for advocacy better encompass the entire non-profit cultural sector than be set up for each aspect or discipline apart: performing arts, visual arts, literature, heritage, film...

However, there is such a structural inequality between the position of the NGOs in culture and public cultural institutions that are ensured of automatic subsidy renewal each year, regardless of their output, that it is hardly conceivable that these two realms can be joined in the same advocacy strategy.

***Public cultural organization tend to take a more defensive and status preserving attitude while the NGO in culture have all the reasons to advocate far reaching reforms and thus take a pioneering role in the setting up of an advocacy strategy.***

Those NGOs that undertake such first steps will find support of the great part of the cultural world in the rest of Europe and especially of the existing advocacy structures in various European countries. They have a chance to contribute and learn at the same time by joining *We Are More campaign*, recently launched by the Culture Action Europe, and thus integrate the national and European dimension of advocacy in their pursuits.

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