



Lithuanian Cultural Politics: On the Move

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Abstract

This article presents the development of a new Lithuanian cultural politics paradigm in response to the changing ideological, economical, and social environment of recent years. Major actions or political documents bearing influence upon the appearance of a new paradigm are reviewed. In addition, the confrontation between two different systems, the socio-humanistic and consumer-oriented, is presented. Lithuanian cultural politics is analyzed with regard to new national and European strategies. Three policy levels are taken into account in this overview, namely the international, national, and municipal domains. The coordination of these three levels is treated as one of the most important tools for a fruitful realization of Lithuanian cultural politics.

For more than a decade, Lithuanian cultural policies were conceived as being inflexible and stuck between two systems: a pro-Soviet, or socialist one; and a pro-Western, or neoliberal one. Every effort by independent cultural operators to move towards a self-regulating market system was met by protests and discontent from established institutions. This was partly due to the transitional nature of the country at that time, when the move towards consumer economics and ideology was extremely rapid and society divided itself according to its understanding and attraction to a consumer life-style. Therefore, a unique postmodern condition was experienced, particularly permeated with ideology, in which competing models acted without any correspondence to the reality of the economic situation.¹

In effect, this transitional situation is coming to an end, and a natural shift towards a new economic paradigm is taking place. The objective of this article is to define the new trajectories of cultural policies during the period from 2008 to 2012 and to evaluate its outcomes for a post-crisis society.

A significant move towards a new cultural paradigm in Lithuania was observable in 2009, one year after the parliamentary elections and the entrance of the Conservative Party into the governance of the country. In 2010, by an initiative of the president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, involving the preparation of a guide for Lithuanian cultural policies, the Seimas adopted a document that sets a precedent based upon the new needs of Lithuanian consumer society and of the European Union in general.² By introducing the concepts of creative industries and the protection of author's rights into the document, a shift towards a new economic model, a creative one, was prioritized in Lithuania.³

However, this shift towards a new economic model is not always supported in everyday life. As many examples show, it is torn apart at the governmental (policy) level and at the operating (provision) level. At the governmental level, the model is confronted by ideological opposition: the agreement that culture should not serve ideological needs, but act as a catalyst to promote the most important freedom, the freedom to express one's opinion, has not yet been reached. Policy debates therefore center on exceptions and crises. For example, a measure to forbid a performance by the prominent Italian director Romeo Castellucci, *On the Concept of the Face of God's Son*, in Lithuania was initiated in the Seimas by members of the Conservative party on the 2nd and 3rd of October 2012.⁴ This case illustrates the desperate attempts of certain conservatives to influence cultural processes at the political level, in spite of all the democratic pretensions they claim to have.

Declarations regarding ideological censorship are supported at an operational level by the segment of society that believes culture can still be divided into modern and postmodern, or in other words, into elite and mass culture, and that someone has the right to evaluate its sense and significance.⁵ A sculpture by Vladas Urbanavičius, *The Tube*, conceived for Vilnius, a European Union Capital of Culture 2009, provoked numerous outcries from different strata of society. One segment of society, supported by local politicians, considered the sculpture offensive, and asked that it be demolished; another part considered it as provocative, proffering an invitation to reflect.

The reality is that, whichever ideology one declares in Lithuania, it ultimately serves the free market system agreed upon when entering the European Union. All the ideologies desire a culture that sells: the ideologies that get more attention in the mass media are presumed to be more successful than the others. The more controversial the story, the bigger the benefit for the mass media companies that nourish themselves on these ideological tensions, and they continue to multiply the stories until the public has had enough.

Cultural policy and government

Willingly or not, the postindustrial free market system penetrates Lithuania's governing mentality as it attempts to adapt itself to the strategic visions defined in EU documents regarding its development over the next decade. Therefore, there was a need for specialists to be put in charge to accomplish the tasks designed by democratic forces. One of the main achievements of the Lithuanian government in the 2008-2012 period, not without the insistence of the President, was that it managed to engage highly skilled professionals for governing the ministries, rather than politicians without the necessary competency. The delegation of the Ministry of Culture can serve as an illustration of Lithuania's aspirations for democratic change. At the beginning of the period under review, the Ministry was entrusted to Remigijus Vilkaitis, an accomplished actor with no administrative or managerial experience. During his time in office, the Ministry did not achieve the required goals, and it was decided in 2010 to replace him. Arūnas Valinskas, head of the former party of National Resurrection, presented himself as a candidate for the post, but was not accepted as minister by the President. Instead, a visual artist with the necessary administrative experience and a high level of professional competence was chosen. Arūnas Gelūnas became Minister in 2010 and was a member of the group that actively prepared the *Lietuvos kultūros politikos kaitos gairės* (Guidelines for Lithuanian Cultural Policies), and who then became the person responsible for the implementation of the ideas defined in the guidelines.

As mentioned earlier, the guidelines promoted the necessity of adapting the country's cultural agenda to real democratic change. The first attempt to attribute a mission to culture was realized in 2001, at a time when Lithuania was still waiting for its entrance into the European Union. At that time, the government produced the *Nutarimas dėl Lietuvos kultūros politikos nuostatų* (Resolution on Regulations for Lithuanian Cultural Policy).⁶ It defined four general directions for cultural development in the country: democracy, openness, identity, and decentralization. Nevertheless, the resolution was primarily conceived as a document to promote national values without direct correlation to the changing international surroundings. With the entrance of Lithuania into the EU in 2004, the country had to reconsider its relational aspect in the context of a new Europe. The new guidelines allowed for an elaboration of new cultural definitions.

Among ten main goals, which included the protection of author's rights, the development of creative industries, education, sustainability, and cultural heritage, the guidelines promoted such objectives as the need to open culture to auto-regulation and to ensure that culture could provide direction for the strategic development of the State. The latter aim needs to be discussed separately, since during the last twenty years, culture had never before been described as a strategic goal in any state legal document.

The aspiration to make culture a strategic part of state policy meant that the government had to take it into account while preparing the document *Lithuania's Progress Strategy: "Lithuania 2030."*⁷ The document stresses such ideas as creativity and innovation. As different discussions progressed, it was clear that integrating culture into state policy was not an easy task to fulfill, since culture was supposed to be covered under the notion of creativity. Nevertheless, culture is mentioned in the text of the strategy's plan more than once and becomes an important notion for defining Lithuania's aspiration to become a "smart society," two other notions being "smart economy" and "smart governance":

Smart society: a happy society that is open [openness] to the ideas of each citizen [creativity], to innovations and challenges, demonstrating solidarity, self-governance and political maturity [responsibility].
[...] Cultural life is of particular importance for each member of society. It is understood to be not only museums, exhibitions or theaters, but also a lot more: a culture of civic awareness and self-expression, generating added value in various sectors of society.⁸

In this statement regarding culture, Lithuania positions itself in the avant-garde of the European Union, since there are no definite statements in the strategy paper *Europe 2020*⁹ regarding culture as an active agent of the discourse. This is pointed out in the European study *Use of Structural Funds for Cultural Projects*, done in 2012. The aim of this recent study is to show that culture should be allotted a larger share of money in the period 2014-2020 than in the period 2007-2013. One of the reasons why culture is threatened with a lack of attention is that it is not considered separately, and apparently can be understood only through other objectives, such as research and innovation, promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises, the information society, and human capital. As the European study points out, "...it is not possible to isolate

investment in culture under these categories (either at the regional or European level), so it remains difficult to have a clear overview of the SF's money spent on culture and creative industries."¹⁰

As Lithuania set itself an ambitious goal to integrate culture into the state's strategic documents, it also needed to take some steps on the operational level. Among the first of these was the attempt to separate two functions, i.e., the political and the administrative, which, until 2012, were regarded as belonging to the ministry. After two years of discussion, a law regarding the formation of a cultural council¹¹ was adopted. This law allows a shift towards decentralized management and, consequently, the decentralization of state money and its distribution in the sector according to the "arm's length" principle. The Lithuanian Culture Council is defined as responsible for administration of state money allocated to culture, whereas the Ministry of Culture's role is to define Lithuanian cultural policies.

Experience distributing money following an "arm's length" principle had already been acquired, it must be admitted, in the administration of the Soros Open Society Foundation, which was active in Lithuania during the first decade of independence, or the Lithuanian Culture and Sports Foundation, founded in 1994. The latter was split into two separate units in 2007, thus facilitating the administration of the sports and culture divisions. Following the example of Scandinavian countries, it accumulated money gathered from lotteries and alcohol and tobacco taxes and then distributed it for culture and sports. Soon, the first results of the newly established system for the distribution of public resources could be observed: it facilitated the creation of non-governmental societies, which started to demand similar rights to those given to cultural institutions established by the state during Soviet times.¹² The demand was especially supported by British neoliberal actions, such as the promotion of creative and cultural industries (CCI) at a conference in Lithuania in 2003.¹³ Politicians and cultural operators realized for the first time that culture could not only have social or educational value, but also an economic one. The first steps were taken to articulate the economic significance of the creative and cultural sector, and to establish the tools that would allow for new financing models.¹⁴ This meant that politicians at the state, regional, and local levels, for the first time since independence, had to articulate their position on the question. These articulations were more or less positive, since the new tools allowed the realization of ambitious infrastructural projects, such as the restoration of abandoned factories or residences for cultural purposes. Nevertheless, it was still difficult to accept and to prove that cultural goods could be an equal player in a free market.

The previously existing Culture Foundation will become a part of the new Culture Council, due to start its activities in 2013. The latter will also oversee the Ministry's programs for culture and art, stipends for artists, and research projects that were previously financed by the state. The new Culture Council is supposed to adopt the successful working model of the formerly established Lithuanian Research Council,¹⁵ designated to promote research in Lithuania and to govern the sector's money. Nevertheless, there are some differences between the two organizations, since the newly established 6 Lietuvos respublikos vyriausybė. Nutarimas dėl Lietuvos kultūros politikos nuostatų. 7 State Progress Council. Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030." d council will still depend on the Ministry of Culture, whereas the Research Council is a structure directly related to the Seimas and to the government. That is, the Culture Council is less autonomous in its decisions than the Research Council, which works as an independent unit in regard to the Ministry of Education. Although the government's intention is to democratize culture, the sector is confronted with the possible danger of a lack of objective evaluation. The new council would rely on experts and their opinions, but the number of Lithuanian experts is very limited, and most of the candidates are, in one case or another, related to cultural activities and, therefore, represent certain interests and trends. Therefore, some doubt whether the newly formed Council can really achieve the goals of objectivity and transparency.¹⁶

Cultural policy and municipalities

Intentions to democratize culture can also be observed on the city level, where, during the last several years, municipal councils initiated local Councils for Culture and the Arts that represent cultural actors and work as an intermediary between artistic communities and politicians. Such councils were established in more than ten Lithuanian cities. Their objective is to analyze the cultural situation in the city and to put forward proposals to different government institutions.¹⁷ As different examples show, the communication between politicians and representatives for culture still lacks reciprocity: politicians would prefer to use these councils to transfer the responsibility for controversial decisions that may spoil their political reputations. The Kaunas case, where the city administration tried to manipulate the Council for Culture and the Arts to close theaters and concert organizations, illustrates such intentions.¹⁸ On the other hand, since they are quite new and local, the various Councils for Culture and the Arts do not really have the power they could actually have for cultural policy development and, therefore, do not support artists sufficiently. Recent activities on the European level, detailed in *Agenda 21 for Culture*,¹⁹ permit the conclusion that common efforts effected by local governments and cities in different parts of the world can influence world development in the coming decades. Numerous cities of the world, joining their efforts together, agreed in 2004 that culture should be promoted – together with the environment, social inclusion, and economics – as one of the fundamental elements for sustainable development in the twenty-first century. According to the model of Australian researcher Jon Hawkes, culture should become the fourth pillar of a model of sustainability.²⁰ One cannot neglect culture's importance for human development. As the research on culture and sustainable development initiated by the promoters of the *Agenda* indicates:

In a society with a growing diversity (not only ethnic diversity), that needs to value knowledge and life-long learning, that is connected (at least potentially) to all the societies of the world... You, he, she, I, we... need to build a cultural pillar [...] that helps us to understand the world by discovering that our roots, our traditions, our cultures, [...] by building on our human development through access to, and practice with, cultural activities.²¹

Local governments in different European countries, such as France or Spain, are actually integrating culture as an important element of sustainable development, and thus forcing local and European politicians to recognize culture as a fourth pillar of sustainable development. However, this is still not the case in Lithuania: no city is represented in *Agenda 21*, and so far there is no city in Lithuania that directly promotes culture as an important means of urban development.

Although, as mentioned above, Lithuanian local governments do not formally recognize the importance of culture for sustainable development, they nevertheless follow the same direction that many other European local governments do. That is, they accept that cities need to create local cultural strategies, create culture councils, or assess cultural impact.²² One of the first cities to create a guide for cultural strategy was the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, in 2011. A cultural strategy is also being developed in Kaunas and is scheduled for implementation in 2013. These basic documents for cultural development will allow the cities to have new impulses and directions. They could become the rationale on which to base the movement towards the liberalization and democratization of the cultural sector on a local level, and thus the shift towards a creative and innovative economy, as it is foreseen in Lithuania's Progress Strategy, could really be accomplished.

During the last four years, Lithuania has made significant strides toward achieving the objectives declared on the national and international levels. It has adopted several important documents that open new ways for democratic and innovative development; took steps towards the decentralization of the governing of culture by separating the political (Ministry of Culture) and administrative functions (Culture Council); and introduced state programs that strengthen the impact of CCI, and thus would make Lithuania more modern.²³ On the municipal level, the first steps were taken to democratize the culture sector and to open it for city communities and thus move toward a more locally autonomous system. New culture management models will be adopted, while recognizing the importance of city culture strategies and the importance of inter-sector cooperation.

Nevertheless, there is still a large gap between the aspirations declared in the EU documents promoting culture, CCI, creativity and innovation, and local decisions. Most of the time, they are not coordinated, and therefore EU cultural policy does not necessarily directly influence local cultural policies, or vice versa. There are several reasons for this: as many reports show, it is still difficult to promote culture, even on the EU level. Culture is still not universally seen as an important means for future EU development and, therefore, is not understood as such on a local level. In order to achieve this mutual comprehension, different tasks concerning education on this topic and the demonstration of its benefits (both social and economic) have yet to be accomplished, but Lithuania is on the right path in pursuing these goals.

Notes:

1 Rubavičius, *Postmodernusis*, 99.

2 Lietuvos respublikos kultūros ministras. *Lietuvos kultūros politikos kaitos*.

3 Howkins, *Kūrybos ekonomika*, 15-24.

4 Samoškaitė, "Pasipiktinusi konservatorė."

5 Horkheimer, *Apšvietos dialektika*, 217-159; Fiske, *Populiarosios kultūros*, 106-107.

6 Lietuvos respublikos vyriausybė. *Nutarimas dėl Lietuvos kultūros politikos nuostatų*.

7 State Progress Council. *Lithuania's Progress Strategy "Lithuania 2030."*

8 Ibid., 8; 10.

9 European Commission. *Europe 2020: A European strategy*.

10 Directorate-General for Internal Policies, *Use of Structural Funds for Cultural Projects*, 35.

11 Lietuvos respublikos Seimas, *Lietuvos kultūros tarybos įstatymas*.

12 At the end of the nineties, independent cultural organizations, such as the Oskaras Korshunovas Theater, the Arts Printing House, the Theater and Cinema Information and Education Center, the Dance Information Center, and Eimuntas Nekrošius's theater, Meno fortas, were created.

13 Ivoškutė, *Kūrybinės industrijos*.

14 See: Lietuvos respublikos kultūros ministras, *Įsakymas dėl kūrybinių industrijų skatinimo* and Lietuvos respublikos ūkio ministras, *Įsakymas dėl valstybės planuojamų verslo inkubatorių*.

15 Lietuvos mokslo taryba, "The Research Council of Lithuania."

16 Rauktytė, "Lietuvos kultūros taryba – diskusijų verpetuose."

17 Kauno miesto savivaldybė, "Kultūros ir meno taryba."

18 Bulota, "Kauno menininkai."

19 United Cities and Local Governments, *The Agenda 21 for Culture*.

20 Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar*.

21 Culture and sustainable development: examples of institutional innovation and proposal of a new cultural policy profile, United Cities and Local Governments, *The Agenda 21 for Culture*, 17.

22 Ibid.

23 In 2008, the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Sciences opened a program called Lithuanian Creative and Cultural Industries. At the same time, a National Association for Creative and Cultural Industries was created.

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