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Croatian cultural policy in transition: a quarter of a century lost

This article deals with the reasons, possible causes, and manifest missed opportunities due to which Croatian culture did not have a successful transition. It especially focusses on the mechanisms and instruments used by the relevant authorities in the Republic of Croatia when it comes to decision-making in the field of culture. Implicit decisions with no strategic documents allow those in charge of cultural systems to continuously avoid setting up strategic planning, carrying out an analysis of the present situation and introducing professional criteria into practice – not to mention the unavoidable continuity of a bad practice from the past. The absence of all this unavoidably leads to non-transparency, which introduces harmful mechanisms such as conflict of interest and clientelism as the dominant levers of action at the highest levels of all procedures. There are many reasons for such a model, the foremost being that, like all the countries that came into existence within the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in times of political upheaval and the introduction of multi-party systems following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the wars that ensued, Croatia too has missed its chance to develop culture as a space for the enrichment of society, for expanding horizons and promoting tolerance, instead orienting it towards the sphere of ideological and political control and (self-)censorship. Acting in the mentioned ways, cultural policy stakeholders in Croatia have so far failed to build trust in cultural value that would enable development, innovation, reform, continuity, inter-cultural dialogue, pluralism, diversity, and something that is nowadays essential, yet wilfully ignored – the development of cultural management.

Keywords: cultural policy, transition, the post-Yugoslavian case, cultural management, organisational models, ideologization of culture

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Introduction

The discussion about the possible causes and missed opportunities due to which the transition in Croatian culture simply did not succeed – indeed, it has probably never actually taken place as a serious effort[1] – certainly has to take into consideration the encumbering continuity of bad practice from earlier stages of cultural development, as well as all the circumstances (historical, social, political, economic and cultural) that shaped the starting point for the beginning of the process of transition. Likewise, it is also necessary to comprehend the dimensions of the overall failure of the immense social experiment simplifiedly termed *transition*, which ultimately turned out to be a complete fiasco on a global level, having given a wide berth to the expected processes of transformation, integration, and development when it comes to culture.

Unfortunately, transition is still a largely misunderstood process. The causes and effects of its failures have been researched ever since its beginnings, yet very rarely has the process itself – historically unprecedented as it was – been subjected to critical scrutiny. Here, we will consider fifteen countries that emerged from the dissolution of the former USSR, and a further fourteen Eastern European and Central Asian post-communist countries – a total of twenty-nine[2] transition countries, eleven of which are EU member states.[3]

In any case, its utter and global failure makes even the term "transition" itself seem inappropriate. For more than thirty years, post-communist countries have allegedly been "transitioning" into the world of developed Western democracy, and still, they have not "transited". The logical question arises: why is it so, or why have they not at least visibly inched towards the goal. Were the expectations unreasonably high, or was perhaps the very idea of transition a utopia?

According to Dejan Jović, "the post-Yugoslavian transition was five-fold", since the political system, the economic system, the state framework, identity politics all changed at once; "it was a transition from peace into war and from war into peace, which made the Yugoslavian area an exception in relation to all the other transition countries in Europe after the Cold War" (Jović, 2017.:72). Croatia, along with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Vojvodić and Ljumović, 2016; Mrđenović, 2020), was most caught up in identity-related and other changes that Jović has written about, and has, also like the other newly emerged countries within the territory

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[1] The failure of the transformation and its almost complete absence in the culture outside the identity framework makes it almost impossible to talk about "cultural transformation," which makes it more in line with the facts to talk about "transformation and culture."

[2] These are: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Croatia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine (in Europe) and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan (in Central Asia).

[3] Most analyses of transition processes often overlook the specific and similarly problematic transformations in other post-authoritarian societies such as Portugal, Spain and Greece, as well as the very specific Mongolian transition.

of the former Yugoslavia, missed its chance to create culture as a platform not only for people to shape their own personal identities, but as a generator of all development and progress in the best tradition of republicanism, following the role-model of the most successful European practice.[4] Many studies testify to the situation being similar in the neighbourhood, with Vesna Đukić Dojčinović for instance detecting "seven causes of transition confusion" in the Serbian culture (Đukić Dojčinović, 2007: 359), chief among which is the problem of ignorance of planning and communication in designing cultural policy (371). Vjeran Katunarić is right when he asserts that cultural transition in post-communist countries is "most vaguely defined", as "the old conceptual problem [occurred]: what does *culture* mean, or does it mean anything?" (Katunarić, 1997:195). In Croatia, however, where (as elsewhere) this was no mere academic question, but a consequence of the "separation of culture from the agendas of new political and entrepreneurial elites" (Katunarić, *ibid.*), there had existed a sufficient concentration of knowledge about cultural policies, yet unfortunately the level of political will to shape such policies and apply them was never reached, hence the incessant deferring of this work. Thus, it is indeed possible to ironically conclude that in this case, "the transition is retarded, that is, slowed-down or belated" (Lukić, 2004: 66).

In seeking to comprehend the causes, circumstances and negative influences on the process of transition, and especially to comprehend the long-term consequences of its failure, three factors can be observed most clearly as crucial to the lack of success of the transition process in Croatian cultural policy: *insufficient use of the existing human potentials* (or *poor human resource management*); omnipresent *corruption*, which has permeated all the segments of the society, including culture; and the continuous, direct and immediate *influence of politics upon cultural production*. These, the most conspicuous problems and their toxic effects can be recognised in the lack of vision; inefficient though extensive legislation (see Goldstein, 2016; and on theatre in particular, Zlatović, 2009) that generates conflicts of interest, clientelism and chaos (see Lončar, 2013, Lukić, 2004); the modes of decision-making and especially the criteria used, largely based on personal relations rather than professional practice; and consequently in modes of financing that are untransparent, biased towards the public sector and averse to fostering independent culture, mobility of artists and artworks, and inter-cultural dialogue and strengthening of civil society; in inadequate (mainly *ad hoc*) planning; as well as in the absence of permanent education for managers and administration, that is, for users and the state apparatus; and finally, in the all-but-inexistent evaluation of cultural production – which is considered a precondition for excellence as the basic predisposition of artistic agency (more on evaluation in Lukić, 2011; Dragojević, Žiljak, 2008; Banović, 2013 and 2018: 213–222; Lončar, 2013).

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[4] For instance, the forms of practice that Vjeran Zuppa was among the first to put forward in his *Notebook* (Zuppa, 2000).

Where did the transition transit, or what happened to the transition?

The processes of post-communist countries' integration into the European Union were accompanied by large oscillations in stipulating criteria, in the application, evaluating and interpreting of the criteria stipulated offhand, as well as in fulfilling the tasks they were being set. In her comprehensive research into the economic, social and demographic indicators significant to EU criteria in all the Western Balkans countries, Tatjana Sekulić (2020) has observed and proven the oscillations in the way data are used in EU progress reports. Comparative analyses of EU reports clearly point to "statistical data being used for political purposes" (Sekulić, 2020, Kindle, loc. 2650). While thus directing the transition process, the EU simultaneously imposed its own agenda even where local communities not only did not recognise this agenda as a priority but did not even understand it properly. In EU decision-making centres, the clearly lacking democratic capacities and near-inexistent democratic culture of post-communist countries were ignored with astonishing ease – only to resurface as a more deeply rooted problem a quarter of a century later (see Enyedi, 2020, Katunarić, 2010), because: "Neoliberalism and the authoritarian tendencies we are seeing in the region today are the offshoots of the nationalism and anti-communism of 1989." (Junes, 2019).

It was with an almost naive optimism based exclusively on assumptions that western democracies expected Eastern European societies to embrace liberal values and the legacy of democratic achievements.[5] What happened instead, however, was a forceful redistribution of political power and a brutal scramble for economic resources, which caused entirely contrary reflexes.

In most transition countries, including Croatia, as Communism fell, an entire (Communist) value system fell, and a new, Western European, democratic, liberal one has never been successfully installed in its place. Thirty years later, indicative exceptions of successful transitions could be observed only in Estonia and the Czech Republic, whose president Václav Havel, 20 years after the downfall of Communism, rightly called the changes brought by the transition "revolutionary and historic" (Palmer, Purchla, 2010:12). Apart from these two, and to an extent also Slovenia, nearly all the other countries evince a very similar pattern of lack of progress and failing to *transit*. In his analysis, Tom Junes sums up resignedly: "Thirty years ago, in 1989, the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe began to implode one after another, until the Soviet Union itself disappeared from the map of Europe in 1991 (...), and Eastern Europe was inspired with hope for a better future. Nevertheless, on the 30th anniversary of the fall of Communism, not much is left of this former optimism. (...) The main question is, 'what went wrong?'" (Junes, 2019). The shortest answer might be: "Just about everything that might have gone wrong," summed up most obviously by Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks: "Despite the promise of democracy brought by 1989, and the promised advent of 'the end of history', the citizens of post-socialist countries

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[5] Such a view was by no means unencumbered by colonial patronisation.

today feel excluded from the processes of deciding about their own fate: the majority of elections have proven to be little more than redistributions of members of one and the same political oligarchy with little to differentiate their political programmes and rhetoric" (Horvat and Štiks, 2015: 25). The idea of transition implied the simultaneous and synchronised transformation and adaptation of the economic, political, social, technological and, certainly, cultural model. Over three decades, several countries – in addition to the aforementioned three, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia, this certainly includes the two other Baltic countries, as well as, to an extent, Hungary and Slovakia – have been somewhat successful in transforming just a greater or smaller segment of the spheres listed above, but none all of them. Therefore, when it comes to these countries, it may be possible to speak of a partly implemented transition, while most of the countries undergoing the process have shown themselves as chronically lacking capacity for serious change on all the aforementioned levels.

The 2013 report by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development has already shown up, among other things, a broadly accepted misapprehension about transition – a belief tracing its origin to the 90s, that all the post-communist countries can carry out transitions, only the speed at which they can do so will differ. However, over more than two decades it became evident that a significant number of these countries entirely lacked sufficient internal capacities to implement the transition process fully and properly (see South East Europe, Regular Economic Report, 2013). In his comparative analysis of Eastern EU member states, the economist Leon Podkaminer (2013: 14) concludes that, from an economic standpoint, "the transition arrived too late". Had it taken place during the 1960s, or even the 1970s, Eastern European countries would, according to his opinion, "have been in a much better situation in relation to the developed countries of the West", and economic adaptation to the new models would be simpler and less traumatic (ibid.: 41).

In addition to the absence of economic and political progress, in the cultural sphere, a long-lasting, sometimes even increasing, tension and antagonism remained between the sphere of cultural production and the political authorities. In resolving their internal tensions and situations of conflict, foreign mediation – where local regimes allow it – is still useful, even needed. Thus, researchers led by Helmut K. Anheier, professor of sociology at the Hertie School, and Marie Gillespie, professor of sociology at the Open University, have studied cultural relations within transition societies with respect to the various international programmes that may help open dialogue between sides at conflict. The researchers have especially emphasised the problematic relationship between politics and cultural workers (see the Cultural Value Project, 2019). Carelessly camouflaged, or entirely open forms of censorship and political pressure on freedoms in culture and the arts have reached worrying levels in nearly all the post-communist countries, including Croatia (see Lukić, 2018). In the more narrow regional framework within which one can observe the transition in Croatia, Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks (2015) have pointed out that "the usual story about the post-socialist Balkans mainly rests upon the following tropes: oscillating between liberalisation and authoritarianism; complex

relationships between the state, organised crime and the economy; corruption; the achievements and drawbacks of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; regional cooperation or disputes; and, finally, the successes and failures in the EU accession process." All of this led to what the political commentator Nenad Pejić simply summed up as "the interminable transition in the Balkans" (Pejić, 2020).

In addition, in Croatia the process of transition is additionally encumbered by the widespread excuse that it was war and transition in tandem, rather than bad governance, that were to blame for the many misfires and failures. Vjeran Katunarić has detected three broader levels of cultural change: the level of transformation of values (from collectivism to individualism); the symbolic level (mostly in the form of nationalism); and the level of institutional change (the demand of the market in most spheres) (Katunarić, 1997: 95). This was just the initial stage in the formation of the development instruments for governing culture in Croatia, with a new executive and helmed by a single party, which invariably based its vision on an ethnic character, while intensely obstructing transition processes, and democratic processes in general which were explained by the idea that "totalitarian government suffocates the national cultural tradition and religion" (Dragičević-Šešić, Stojković, 2013: 34). Thus, in all the great cultural institutions (the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Matica hrvatska, the Croatian Radiotelevision, the Croatian National Archives, the Croatian National Theatres (CNTs), the Dubrovnik Summer Festival, the Split Summer Festival, etc.), the programming and governance were transformed overnight in accordance with the forceful vision of so-called *spiritual renewal*, seeking to constitute them as temples of the new, *homeland culture*, resulting mostly in establishing their noticeable financial privilege, lack of oversight and evaluation, widespread clientelism, and, consequently, a substantial deterioration both in their programmes and in their operation overall (see Banović, 2013; Banović, 2018: 189–192; 213-222; 253–256: Banović, 2020: 139–157). With such forceful *favouring* of state-run establishments in culture, party membership and loyalty to the one party with a strong leader at its helm would become decisive in the way (their own) people were appointed into the aforementioned institutions' administrations and offices; thus, membership in the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was to become immensely more important than party-unaffiliated expertise. Therefore, people unaffiliated with a party heading public cultural institutions were rare precedents. In addition to numerous intra-departmental divisions and perceptible cultural amnesia, the ultimate results of the Nineties in Croatian cultural policy were a return to *traditionalism* and *historicism*, intense *spectacularisation*, all kinds of *anniversary-mongering* and *commercialisation* of cultural programmes, and the extremely dangerous closing of doors towards influences from abroad.[6] For instance, Jasen Boko writes that during the nineties, the performing arts in Croatia were shaped in a way that could be described

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[6] More on the spreading of the harmful practice in Croatia from the 90s until today in K. Kotarski and G. Radman (eds.), *Hrvatska u raljama klijentelizma – politika, postupci i posljedice institucionalne trgovine moći (collection of papers)*, Zagreb 2020.

as "lots of cash, little to show for it", and that the four CNTs spent public money like "bottomless holes", "creating a theatre of the dead, uninteresting even to its own creators". The result of this was that over the first decade since Croatian independence, performances of significance in the national theatres could be "counted on one hand" (Boko, 2007:31). The theatre is still the sphere where the failure of the transition to occur is the most glaring. Despite the opinions of leading authorities such as Dragan Klarić, that over the course of transition, institutional theatres will change according to any of several logical scenarios (Klarić, 2012), no-one had predicted that *nothing* would actually happen there, and that the now no longer sustainable Austro-Hungarian model of state and city (repertory) theatres, which remained the sole model (with few exceptions) for professional performing arts during Socialism, would remain dominant. Only few among them focussed their missions towards excellence (the Sibiu theatre in Romania, TR in Warsaw, the SNG in Ljubljana, Josef Katona from Budapest, the New Theatre from Riga, Arka from Prague), confirmed by many accolades from festivals world-wide.[7] The last of these, the Prague theatre lost its ensemble in a single day, the new administration sacking all its members, having decided to take the revolutionary step of switching from the repertory model into the model of a production house without an ensemble of its own, ceding its space to other ensembles, and sometimes entering into co-productions with them (Klaić, 2012).

In the early stages of the so-called transition, the countries who simultaneously had to cope with the devastations of war on top of the transformations in their political and economic systems, such as Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, were in a more difficult situation; however, one can only "write off" up to five or six years of lagging behind due to the difficulties arising from war. It is logical to ask the question: what about the remaining twenty-five years? This is more than a quarter of a century lost in missed opportunities chock-full of negative post-war social, political and economic phenomena such as the broken bonds between the erstwhile republics (especially the chasm that had opened up among the Croats, Serbs and Bosnians), international isolation, migrations, privatisation, stratification of the population, corruption and crime, and overall pauperization (see Katunarić, 1997, Dragojević and Šešić, 2008; Lukić, 2009; Vidović, 2012). Writing about transition processes in Croatian culture, at the very beginning of her argument, Andrea Zlatar emphasises that, "What is worst, as far back as the first half of the Nineties, the noun 'war' had already been turned from a sign marking the real state of affairs into a metaphysical reason and justification/excuse for everything (bad) that went on." (Zlatar, 2008:17). This excuse and justification are however objectively unacceptable, even if we were to ignore the radically drastic examples of exceptionally quick reconstruction and successful recovery after war, such as in the cases of Dresden, or even Hiroshima.

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[7] During the mid-Nineties, there were more than 600 subsidized repertory theatres in Central and Eastern Europe, and more than 450 in the former USSR, each producing between 1 and 16 premières every year, while employing between 100 and 150 thousand people on permanent contracts (Klaić, 1997).

In this light, the Croatian thirty years of "excuses" found in incomparably smaller wartime destructions sound utterly implausible, and amateurishly put together. This is precisely the very direct conclusion Zlatar makes: "War and transition became the excuse for all the failures that were actually the consequences of poor cultural governance, a justification for postponing essential infrastructural reforms, a mask to disguise the pursuit of private interests in the sphere of public, common good" (Zlatar, 2008: 17/18).[8] If to support this, by way of an illustration of the consequences of the change in the cultural system in the former republics, we were to provide just a random overview by sector, we would have devastating findings that testify to the fact that the "circle of possible political and cultural change has been closed" (Katunarić, 1997; the National report, 1998; Banović, 2010, 2013, 2018): there are no public TV companies that are not controlled by the ruling parties/coalitions that represent themselves as the sole true defender of the national identity, as the CDU does in the case of Croatia.

When it comes to the literary industry, despite the huge rise in the number of private publishing houses, distribution is in a precarious situation (primarily because of the imposition of the new VAT system). The shrinking market has meant circulations are symbolic, and, to top it all, for 25 years no-one has found a way to introduce international book distribution within the territory of the former Yugoslavia, particularly among those countries (Croatia, BH, Serbia and Montenegro) where the language barrier is negligible.

The film industry (overflowing with private production houses and marked by the failed privatisation of Yugoslavian film companies) and film markets are small and negligible despite some individual successes on the international stage and cannot survive without direct and copious state subsidies. Another factor here in Croatia, is the intense pressure by war veterans' associations not just on the budget, but also on the proper "patriotic" content of the films.

Visual artists have lost their markets, while poor legislation in the field makes it impossible to tame the black market.

The dominant historicism has led to cultural policies being focussed more on preserving certain selected aspects of the national cultural heritage concerning historical monuments and the political history of past centuries. In Croatia, many monuments have been destroyed or damaged during the aggression by Serbia and the Yugoslavian People's Army, but, conversely, several thousand monuments and memorials to the People's Liberation Struggle were destroyed during the war and in its aftermath.

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[8] Three years after publishing these conclusions, Andrea Zlatar got the chance to directly influence the changes from her position as Culture Minister of the Republic of Croatia, but a résumé of her tenure as minister unfortunately does not feature a significant number of essential "infrastructural reforms", or a total absence of the pursuit of "private interests in the sphere of public, common good", although to be fair, war was not used as an excuse.

The networks of libraries and archives that had developed after 1945 are still in existence, and this sphere is the only one that has preserved some semblance of continuity, although both these segments often find themselves under attack from influential elements affiliated with the Catholic Church and war veterans' organisations.

Lost time and lost people

In addition to systematic and organised timewasting in the transition processes, Croatia, not wanting to implement a proper Cultural Development Strategy[9] (see Banović 2010), kept developing merely "strategies" for losing human resources rapidly and *en masse*. Negative selection processes, preferring compliance to competence, party obedience, ideological exclusiveness, retrograde tendencies of re-traditionalising the society, aggressive clericalization, conservatism and an inclination towards authoritarianism in cultural governance have repelled, excluded or even literally drove off a significant number of artists, cultural workers and intellectuals who without a doubt could have significantly contributed to Croatian culture in its transition processes. In addition to the already mentioned excuse of war, those in power have often also resorted to citing lack of funds, ruthlessly ignoring the fact that in Croatia, huge sums have literally been thrown at and squandered on utterly pointless ideological and special interest-led propaganda and anniversary projects, continuously and untransparently flowing towards the ruling circles and their clientelist lackeys in the sphere of culture and the arts (see Banović, 2020). In fact, the money was always there, but the modes of distributing it, policies to expend rather than invest it, as well as untransparent criteria and methods of allocating it, have ultimately resulted in an overall lack of money for culture (see Lukić, 2011: 78/79).

Likewise, no mention was made of the overlooked fact that the problem for societies whose transitions failed was by no means primarily a matter of too little money (having in mind all the open and mostly unused opportunities for European financial support[10]), but a lack of people capable of finding money, meaning creatively invest it – in short, a lack of competent and professional cultural managers. In what was anyway a (too) shallow pool of human resources, in a state with a small and poorly educated population, the level was further lowered in Croatia by the constant

[9] The only Cultural Development Strategy in the history of the RC was initiated by the left-leaning governing coalition's Culture Ministry under minister Antun Vujić in 2001, and published as a document in 2001 (Cvjetičanin, Katunarić, 2003). The Government and the Croatian Parliament adopted it in January 2002, but it was never implemented due to the change in government that brought the Croatian Democratic Union back in to power in 2003. The CDU halted the project, and it has languished forgotten ever since, never evaluated or tested in practice.

[10] A particular transition problem with EU funds is that not only does it take expertise and professionalism to "draw" them, but primarily that the funds received must be spent for the declared purpose transparently. This means they are of no interest in places with in built models of corruption.

destruction of the education system, by politicians' open contempt towards competence and expertise, by ideological criteria, protectionism towards the suitable and the obedient, and by excluding critical and opposition voices from decision-making. In short, human resources were most often managed completely unprofessionally (see Lukić, 2010: 147; Lukić, 2011: 22/23).

Although external evaluators, invited as far back as 1998 to help Croatia on its transition path towards the EU, very clearly suggested guidelines for future Croatian cultural policies, while emphasising both new models and "new modes of operation" (Landry, 1998: 31), little or none of this was actually systematically implemented during subsequent efforts to shape such a cultural policy, primarily due to the fact that the principle of subsidiarity, which was the primary principle in Croatian EU accession negotiations, was used as an excuse for the absence of any kind of deliberation on the reforms (see Banović, 2012). At the time, external evaluators made a point of highlighting the importance of human resources (see Landry, 1998: 6), as did Council of Europe recommendations in the discussions on culture and development, which the Croatian Culture Ministry translated and published, also emphasising the importance of mobilising human resources and building their potentials through culture (see Balić, 1997: 34–35). Despite clear instructions, it was precisely in this sphere that has seen the weakest results in Croatia, unless mobilising human potentials in culture is taken also to include both quantitatively and qualitatively highly significant mobilisation of experts to emigrate abroad. Furthermore, since the very beginnings, the state has imposed numerous new actions unsuitable to culture, thus continuously complicating artists' position in society: legislation discouraging entrepreneurs' investment in culture, while the costs of cultural programmes regularly rise due to the introductions of new taxes and surtaxes on authors' fees; incentives for purchasing artworks are eliminated; there is no legal regulation of donations and private sponsorship; while the sales tax and customs regulations do not recognise the particularities of culture and art.

Thus, another opportunity to transform Croatia from a conservative, nationally closed state into an autonomous and modern European country with an *impresario* cultural policy[11] that aspires towards a post-national and postmodern selection with a strong influence from alternative, that is, independent culture, which today in Croatia unfortunately boils down to little more than haphazardness, that is, coincidence.

[11] Sanjin Dragojević wrote about the classification of countries by cultural policy strategies and systems, that is, by models derived from analyses of their economic development, political system or cultural tradition (see Dragojević, 2006). He observed six models: liberal, parastate, state bureaucratic-enlightenment, state prestige-enlightenment, national-emancipatory and regional/linguistic/ethnic. See also Dragičević, Šešić, Stojković (2013), pp. 29–33.

Omnipresent and omnipotent corruption

In the wider atmosphere where "Western Balkans countries are still overflowing with corruption, ethno-nationalist and other social and political tensions," where foreign analysts stress "the absence of the rule of law, poverty" and especially "systematic corruption" (Stojić, Mitrović et al., 2020: 21), corruption, which has been established as a system ever since the beginning of the transition, has continued to rapidly grow in Croatia, almost without hindrance, even after its accession to the EU, permeating nearly all segments of society – as discussed by various local and foreign analysts and observers (see Vladisavljević, 2020). Using exact methodology, Vuk Vuković has demonstrated that voters in Croatia are only willing to punish politicians for corruption in extreme cases, when it becomes "too big and too noticeable" (Vuković, 2020: 125), which allows politicians to produce "networks of mutual dependence" freely and most creatively with economic entities (ibid., 141). All the while, transition countries have developed a specific form of systematic corruption, which Hellman and Kaufmann have termed "state capture" in their analysis. This is a system wherein corruption, through all levels of state authority, directly influences the drafting, adoption and implementation of such laws and court decisions that will not only allow, but legalise further corruption, and where there will simply be no room left for non-corrupt activities (see Hellman and Kaufmann, 2001). It is understandable that in such an environment, culture has not only not been immune to the overall *corruptocracy*, but has largely taken part in it, at several different levels. From the level of the economy, corruption moved on to the academic community, fabricating academic ranks along the corrupt models of the captured state. Appointments in culture relied on obedient executors, through whom maintaining and development of corrupt models of behaviour was guaranteed. Individuals who were practically anonymous in the professional community, and for the most part deeply incompetent, were appointed to leading positions in culture (see Banović, 2018). Their legitimacy was established after the fact by fabricating their (empty) CVs by hastily granting them professional and political awards and accolades. Such a model of installing a corrupt "captured state" model in culture followed the trends whereby corruption permeated the society by osmosis, which rapidly devalued criteria, lowered the lower limits of expectations and devastated the cultural sector to the extent that even the appointment of an entertainer with no knowledge or experience in theatre to the position of artistic director of a national theatre has elicited only the odd and lonely reaction.

Political control over culture

During the first stages of the formation of development instruments for governing (the final decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century), the policies

shaped by the new authorities understood culture as a hybrid between the national romanticism of the nineteenth century and the ideological propaganda from the first half of the twentieth.[12] In this markedly retrograde and anachronistic idea, a special place was held by the ultimate "de-balkanisation" of culture, which in practice meant the negation of all cultural links and any similarities with the south-eastern parts of the former common state, and a frequently grotesque insistence on emphasising mutual differences. The term "Western Balkans" itself was firmly adopted as an official name at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki, having arisen as a concept representing "a combination between political compromise and colonial imagery" (Stojić Mitrović et al., 2020: 20), but was generally rejected, or at the very least ignored in Croatian cultural policies, much like the concept of "region". Vjeran Katunarić has expressly highlighted the "aversion towards cultural manifestations that remind of the Yugoslavian framework of affiliation" (Katunarić, 1997: 108) and "the attitude of reaction towards globalisation and towards the Balkans" (ibid.: 109). In parallel with its own decision that there should be no form of "returning" to the cultural ties and cooperation with the "East", Croatia was faced with the brutally obvious fact that its cultural and artistic production was neither competitive nor interesting enough to the "West".

This situation is best illustrated by the views of three active cultural stakeholders: spurred by one in a series of president Franjo Tuđman's visits to the CNT, the globally renowned playwright Slobodan Šnajder, one of the most persistent critics of such identity-based thinking, wrote that "the Croatian state in its present state (is) about as ridiculous as the Countess Maritza[13] – just not as jolly." (Šnajder, 2007: 231). For his part, theatre critic Jasen Boko has concluded that the Croatian theatre of the Nineties has "intensely felt the processes of transition, dealing in aesthetics appropriate to a transitional period – but the turn of the twentieth century" (Boko, 2007: 32), while the pro-regime director Jakov Sedlar, director of Drama during Georgij Paro's tenure as artistic director in the early 90s, has asserted that Croatia "must build its cultural policy on the idea that each Croat should feel pride in realising all that we have to show to the world."[14]

However, whatever of Croatian culture was interesting and held in regard in the West was, almost as a rule, critically disposed towards the dominant narratives of the ruling ideology, and as such either systematically ignored or, not infrequently, officially stigmatised as "anti-Croatian" and unpatriotic (as, for instance, was the case with the aforementioned Šnajder). In this space between the scorned neighbourhood and the desired "developed West", in the initial phases of transition, Croatian national culture developed in the narrow, limited, closed, and neglected space within narrow

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[12] During his short, nine-month term in office during 2016, a Croatian culture minister finally openly and publicly instituted such an anachronistic vision of culture not only as a desirable and ideal model for the 21st century, but as the only and exclusive model to be financed from the national budget.

[13] An operetta by the Hungarian composer Imre Kálmán (translator's note).

[14] In conversation with Ž. Ciglar for the Večernji list (19 December 1996, p. 17).

local borders within which criteria, benchmarks and standards changed drastically, adapting to an exclusivist, mono-cultural model and its provincial narrow-mindedness. Political influence did not only define the orientation towards a cultural production that is parochial, anachronistic, and retrograde, but also produced the politically suitable cadres necessary to such a culture. Particularly in the earliest years of the transition, hasty creation of *new elites* in culture required the expedited production of professional cadres, with maximum flexibility in applying professional criteria. Overnight, "experts" were politically appointed to positions which required serious competences, of which their professional CVs betrayed no trace. In parallel, attempts to establish European cultural policies at the state level were sporadic, disorganised and unwillingly, primarily since the ruling political elites (regardless of which political option or coalition held power) never relinquished the desire and need to directly control culture, using it for their own needs and goals. Indeed, in Croatian politics and political views on culture (especially considering the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary election), one can clearly observe what Zsolt Enyedi characterises as five "intellectual, ideological and organisational innovations" used by authoritarian extreme-right politics to further imperil the level of democratic achievements. These innovations are "a particular combination of victim mentality, self-confidence and resentment against the West, the transformation of neighbour-hating nationalisms into a civilizationist anti-immigrant platform, the delegitimization of civil society and the return to the belief in a strong state, the resurrection of the Christian political identity, and the transformation of populist discourse into a language and organizational strategy that is compatible with governmental roles." Enyedi calls this innovation "paternalist populism" (Enyedi, 2020).

At the same time, an identical and increasingly direct impact of politics on culture is also clearly discernible, implying indirect, and even direct, censorship. In Croatia, direct censorship on the part of state-controlled institutions is less visible, and clearly functions primarily through withholding financing, while open censorship is carried out mostly through (very willing) concessions by the state to aggressive pressures from various untouchable para-political and para-state organisations tied to the radically conservative elements in the Catholic Church and to many war veterans' associations. By foisting their populist discourse on the perfectly egalitarian public debate with the professional and expert arguments of culture and the arts, and especially by kowtowing to their extreme conservatism, political pressures thus limit or suspend the right to free expression in the arts and imperil the democratic atmosphere necessary to cultural development (see Lukić, 2018; Banović, 2018: 189–192; Banović, 2018: 257–260).

The mainstream media, brought under political control long ago, and faced with systematic elimination of cultural sections, dismissals/non-employment of journalist critics, and elimination of critique as a formative category in artistic creation, are incapable of showing resistance towards such phenomena, while the systematic throttling of the few independent media is a kind of censorship strategy. Karol Jakubowitz

very convincingly explains this phenomenon by analysing aspects of transition in post-communist countries' media. Highlighting the issues with freedom of the media, he stresses the absurdity of the situation where transition societies must deal in the 21st century with a problem that Western European societies have already solved in the 17th century, above all the problem of state censorship (Jakubowitz, 2005: 7). What's more, "Very little has been done to achieve true democratization of the media system or media organizations" (ibid.: 8), so most post-communist countries still "have a long way to go yet before the basic elements of media independence and freedom of expression are safeguarded" (ibid.: 13). An equally long way to go remains until truly free spaces for cultural agency, cultural variation and cultural diversity are established.

Conclusion

The transition caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall, that is, the iron curtain, has led to widespread transformative processes across Eastern and Central Europe, and rapidly brought about fundamental changes throughout the continent. In former communist countries particularly, the cultural sector has undergone numerous changes, which led to it having to respond to yet more numerous challenges where – as far as the newly emerged countries of the former Yugoslavia are concerned – there have been next to no positive results, as "the old" has to this day not in fact been replaced by the new, while nearly the entirety of the bad practices from the previous stages of cultural development have been transformed/applied in line with the narrow, *ad hoc*, party-interest paradigm. Thus, the end results of the initial period of transition in Croatian cultural policy-making – along with the numerous divisions within the department and a strong cultural amnesia – were a return to traditionalism and historicism in the arts, and an intense spectacularisation and commercialisation of cultural programmes. Anachronistic and conservative understanding of culture and failure to comprehend the challenges of contemporary European practices, along with the systematically deferential kowtowing to ever more aggressive demands by the most conservative elements in society to impose ideological censorship, have resulted in a severe provincialisation of Croatian culture. From the beginnings of the (attempted) transition until today, no cultural policy was established that could serve to underpin the successful development of this segment of society. On the contrary, in Croatia today the fundamental determinants of any kind of articulated cultural policy are imperilled: protection of existing cultural values, promotion of artistic creativity and participation by the wider society. In addition, instead of stimulating independent culture and its diversity, the state has imposed numerous new actions unsuitable to culture, thus continuously complicating artists' position in society, rendering their influence in society today negligible.

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