

Cultural state policies: Support for performing arts forums

Joanna Spassova-Dikova*

Abstract. The study is a part of a larger project, which aims to examine national cultural policies related to the support of different cultural forums, and in particular various performing arts festivals in Bulgaria. The main emphasis is on theatrical international and national festivals and reviews in our country of the productions of professional state, municipal and private formations as a platform for presenting contemporary Bulgarian theatre art in local and global context, as well as for outlining strategies for its future development. One of the main questions discussed is why art must be supported by the state and viewed as an object of national identity and pride. Some ideas for optimizing state policies in the field of supporting festivals of the performing arts are given.

Keywords: cultural policies, Cultural Strategy, intangible cultural heritage, performance/performative/performing/stage arts festivals in Bulgaria

The aim of the study, as a part of a larger project, is to examine the national cultural policies related to the support of different cultural forums, and in particular, of various performing arts festivals in Bulgaria. The main emphasis is on theatrical international and national festivals and reviews in our country of the productions of professional state, municipal and private formations as a platform for presenting contemporary Bulgarian theatre in local and global context, as well as for outlining strategies for its future development.

The National Cultural Strategy in project

The development of a National Cultural Strategy started more than a decade ago. In 2011, a draft was presented, after which work on it continued, but there is still not officially adopted National Cultural Strategy in Bulgaria.

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The draft *Strategy for the Development of Bulgarian Culture* explicitly states that: “The Strategy enshrines the understanding that national culture is a set of separate areas/elements, which presupposes, on the basis of the common strategic framework and outlined vision, to develop specific strategic documents (strategies) with a comprehensive in-depth analysis and vision for each sector separately describing in detail the specific activities, individual steps and ways to realize the common vision for the development of culture for the period 2019-2029” (Strategiya 2019, 5). Obviously, the Strategy puts emphasis on diversity. The draft specifically discusses the importance of support for the performing arts pointing out five categories: theatre; music; dance; contemporary performing arts, performances - outdoor and non-traditional; and theatre/music/dance festivals. The conclusions made about the measures, which the state needs to take in this field, where conditions for independent and strong market behaviour are still not created, are important. Special attention is paid to the emergence of atypical market relations and a specific characteristic of the performing arts. This predetermines the obligatory state sponsorship, insofar as the performing arts have both intrinsic and additional values that separate them from ordinary consumer goods and define them as a “worthy commodity”. That is why the provision of state support is an expression of respect for the public interest (Strategiya 2019, 30).

Performing arts

Performing arts is a very broad term, but usually it refers to those forms of art in which artists use their voices, bodies or inanimate objects to convey a particular artistic expression. The performing arts are different from the visual arts in which artists use paints, canvas or different materials to create artifacts. Performing arts include various art forms that are performed in front of a live audience. One of their main features is *liveness* (Ausländer 1999), although it is possible to record these events and watch them not *hic et nunc*.

Very close to the term are the concepts of performance art, performative arts, stage arts, etc., which put the accent on different aspects of these arts - the performer himself, the art, the event or the place where it is performed. In Encyclopaedia Britannica, the general term used is *performance art*: “a time-based art form that typically features a live presentation to an audience or to onlookers (as on a street) and draws on such arts as acting, poetry, music, dance, and painting. It is generally an event rather than an artifact, by nature ephemeral, though it is often recorded on video and by means of still photography” (Performance art). The liveness of this kind of art, which does not produce objects, artifacts, but events, that take place before the eyes of the spectators, is accentuated.

The debate on naming such live arts is rather complicated and I will not discuss it in debt now, but I would like to cite Patrice Pavis, an outstanding theatre scholar and author of one of the best theatre dictionaries. He argues that in the different languages, the terms for defining phenomena of the performing arts use quite different concepts, which pertain to the presenter, or

to the represented, or to the place or ways of presentation (performing) (Pavis 2002, 269).

In the cited Cultural Strategy, the term used is *performing (stage) arts* and in it one of the cultural areas is given in brackets as a specification (Strategiya 2019, 18).

In general, theatre, dance, ballet, music, some forms of painting arts could be identified as performing arts. Even the screen arts, although not live, are performing in some way. Performing arts could be professional or amateur. The focus of this text, however, is only on state policies to support one of the performing arts: the professional theatre in Bulgaria and especially the theatre festivals of professionals, where many theatre productions could be presented to broader audiences, including international ones.

Theatre festivals and cultural state policies in Bulgaria

The role of theatre festivals is rather important as a meeting point of artists and audiences. The director of the one of the most popular theatre festivals in Bulgaria “Varna Summer” Nikolay Yordanov outlines that “The main purpose of the festival is the meeting - a meeting of different troupes with different aesthetics from different cities and countries, which, being in one time and space to appear in a common poster - the audience and guests of the festival to have the opportunity to see them and continue, to have follow-up connections, follow-up contacts, follow-up projects. These are very important things for us, but there is, of course, a look at the Bulgarian selection, a look at the alternative stage, a look at what is happening in Europe and we can afford to show it to Varna audience” (Yordanov 2015).

It must be acknowledged that the draft *Strategy for the Development of Bulgarian Culture* places special emphasis on festivals of the performing arts and in particular theatre ones. The motivation for such special attention is as follows: “It has been proven that the budget funds invested in festivals are multiplied many times - the state stage institutes attract financial resources from sponsors, which would not be available without the festival. The importance of the festivals is above all for the Bulgarian audience. It is necessary to rethink the status, selection criteria and selection of counterparties from other countries in order to increase their role as a stimulator for the international presentation of Bulgarian theatre and to improve the conditions for creative mobility. Increasing the financial potential for the international and national festivals is an opportunity to expand the international presence of quality and significant production and creators on the European and world stage” (Strategiya 2019, 28-29).

In the text is pointed out that in Bulgaria there is a well-developed institutional infrastructure for the performing arts, which includes 51 state cultural institutes, 57 municipal cultural institutes and more than 150 non-governmental organizations in the field of performing arts. There are also currently 37 state theatres, 10 municipal theatres and a dynamically changing number of private theatre formations. State and municipal theatres operate “continuously”, as do

twenty of the private theatre formations. According to their artistic profile, state theatres are dramatic, dramatic-puppet, puppet, theatre-musical (Strategiya 2019, 25).

Further in the draft *Strategy for the Development of Bulgarian Culture* it is outlined that: “Performing arts are synthetic. In their forms of expression they harmonize word, music, dance, fine arts. Stage art is not, and cannot be, a radical and classic market entity. In culture management, it is defined as a “losing entrepreneur”, i.e., as an activity which is (should be) difficult to operate on the free market. The goals of the theatre, music and dance institutes as creative organizations, as well as the ways of achieving them, are, by default, little applicable to the logic of the market. Briefly, performing arts would hardly work without public support. The state should continue to respond to regularize defects through:

- Price subsidies that enable Bulgarian citizens and their organizations to participate more widely in cultural life.
- Subsidies for projects and programs to create and disseminate cutting-edge and innovative ideas.
- The essence of the performing arts is live work, which is both a raw material and a finished product.
- Performing arts are not technological production and cannot (like the industry) increase the capital productivity invested in it” (Strategiya 2019, 29).

I would like to mention that on the website of the Ministry of Culture for 2019 there were 41 professional theatre forums on the list, where 21 organizations were supported (Profesionalno teatralno izkustvo 2019). Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic made impossible to realize the planned forums for 2020. It was not until the end of July 2020 that a session for supporting theatre festivals was opened (Sesiya za finansova podkrepa).

It would be fair to emphasize, however, that the state (with or without National Cultural Strategy) is making efforts to support performing arts festivals in the spirit of the *positive theories of subsidies to performing arts*.

Positive theories of subsidies to performing arts

In the 1960s, for the first time in the scientific literature, the American economists William Baumol and William Bowen examined the performing arts from a very specific economic point of view in the book *Performing arts: The Economic Dilemma*. Their main conclusions are that the real costs of performance almost always rise. The financial pressure on the performing arts cannot be expected to ease over time. The live performing arts belong to that sector of the economy where productivity cannot be increased at anything like the general rate. Costs, therefore, inevitably mount; revenues do not keep pace. Live performing arts cannot expect to pay for themselves without subsidies, direct or indirect. The gap between income and costs is bound to grow over the years ahead. It is not only that the live performing arts do not pay for themselves, but that, within the developing economic system, they will show deficits of increasing size (Baumol, Bowen 1966, vii).

Further Baumol and Bowen develop their theses. They argue that:

- the cost of preparing a performance, regardless of its genre, duration and other characteristics, always increases faster than the consumer price index;
- ticket price increases often exceed the consumer index, but because these revenues are always less than the cost of a single performance, real revenue growth is not observed;
- the pressure of costs and their continuous increase over time, as well as the need for artists to receive remuneration for their work in line with rising inflation, put creative organizations in a state of ongoing financial crisis (Baumol, Bowen 1966).

Baumol and Bowen's research formed the basis for developing a positive theory of subsidizing the arts, which suggests that the arts objectively need external financial intervention to fill the existing financial-cost gap. Thus, many major stage institutions rely on financial support from additional sources - foundations, sponsorships, donations, etc., and are in constant demand. The impact of Baumol-Bowen theory on the creation of special cultural policies in some countries at the end of the 20th and the beginning of 21st century in the conditions of free market economy is considerable.

Their ideas were developed in later studies by other scholars such as Alan Peacock, David Throsby, Victor Ginzburgh (Peacock 1993; Throsby 2000; Throsby 2010; Ginzburgh 2003; Ginzburgh, Ours 2003), and others.

On the other hand, authors such as Ernest van den Haag and Harold Horowitz (Van den Haag 1995, 249-260; Horowitz 1989, 1-19) hold the opposite view - that the arts should not be subsidized by the state at all. Their main arguments are:

- everyone pays for the art through taxes, but not everyone has access to it;
- subsidies reduce the level of art as organizations raise money regardless of the quality of the production;
- the government may interfere with the choice of political repertoire.

It could be said that in Bulgaria the government subsidizes performing arts. Otherwise, they might not survive as far as the technology of creating and presenting stage productions is unique and realizes limited productivity gains. First of all, the time required for rehearsal and presentation of a play, opera or dance performance is not affected by the productivity. The very live work with creative elements makes rehearsals a basic requirement, which takes time. The product supply is limited as the performance can be repeated a limited number of times for a certain period of time. Stage performance is characterized by high consumption of intellectual and creative energy, which makes it impossible to further increase the intensity of work. The computerization and electronicization of the creative process cannot significantly influence the rehearsal time, the time for the presentation of a performance, and the cost structure so that expenses are reduced. The limited possibilities for introducing equipment and increasing labour intensity suggest that wage rise is associated with significant cost pressures, which cannot be fully offset by raising ticket prices due to restrictions imposed by the purchasing power of the population. More performances are sold at the same ticket price, which in turn leads to higher operating costs. Thus, further increase in supply widens the gap between revenue and expendi-

ture. All these conditions make the existence of the performing arts economically impossible without state support.

For the above reasons, it is clear that the performing arts exist in the context of a constant financial crisis due to their unique economic activity and structure. Therefore, in order to function, they need to be supported by the state, as well as constantly seek additional sources of funding: from donors, sponsors, affiliate programs, as well as partial business activities.

State intervention is especially needed in times of economic crisis, when consumers cut their budget for culture and the cost of one performance increases. A very special situation is the COVID-19 pandemic, when the sector of live performing arts was deeply affected. In this respect, some measures have been taken by the government, which will be the subject of another survey. However, one of the main reasons for the performing arts to be supported by the state lies in their external positive effects.

External positive effects of performing arts

In general, art is a legacy for future generations, preserving tradition, maintaining skills and tastes whose creation takes a long time. By supporting arts the state becomes the guardian of cultural values. One of the most widely recognized external effect of the arts is that they safeguard the national identity, pride and prestige. They also contribute to liberal education. An additional effect is obtained not only in specialized arts education, but due to the fact that the very presence of performance is part of the educational experience. The development and encouragement of artistic innovation and creativity, of new ideas and inventions are a major driver of progress. The performing arts develop a sense of social belonging and social criticism. Visiting the performing arts as a leisure activity is also an expression of social interaction.

All the external positive effects considered have a collective character of consumption and increase the public well-being of all members of society, not just the direct consumers. This is also the reason why art should be supported by the state and viewed as an object of national identity and pride.

Some proposals for state policy changes towards cultural and historical heritage

In the 21st century, performing arts and performing arts festivals in particular should be supported by the state, in accordance with strict criteria for their need for society and the search for high quality, in order to preserve cultural and historical heritage and national identity, develop a common culture and the creative potential of the population, the integration of different groups in the social and cultural life of society. In 2019, round tables, organized by scholars from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences within the National Research Program *Cultural and Historical Heritage, National Memory and Social Development*, supported by the Council of Ministers, were held. The main topic of discussions

was the need for State Policy Changes towards Cultural and Historical Heritage. On these forums, some proposals for changing the current legislation in this field were outlined (Stanovishte 2019). Among them, especially for improving the mechanisms for support of performing arts festivals in Bulgaria, are:

- Balancing support for state/municipal/private initiatives in the field of performing arts festivals;
- Development of mechanisms to support not only professional performances in the field of organizing performing arts festivals, but also amateur activities (especially with regard to community centres, student and student initiatives);
- Balancing support for both already established and popular, and new teams;
- Working with strategically relevant target groups (the elderly, minority integration groups, including disadvantaged people, children and youth audiences) in the field of organizing performing arts festivals;
- Balancing international mobility and exchanging in the country for the promotion of performing arts festivals - global/local;
- Elaboration of mechanisms for obligatory targeted subsidization of certain projects/programs of national and international importance in the field of organizing performing arts festivals;
- Continuous updating of the priorities for supporting projects and programs for organizing performing arts festivals on a competitive basis, in line with the dynamics of national and world contemporary challenges;
- Establishment of a national unified system for selection and quality assessment of project/program proposals for social/regional support for performing arts festivals;
- Establishment of expert groups and councils on a national scale to evaluate priorities in support for performing arts festivals and the quality of project/program proposals;
- Building a national publicly accessible digital platform for the preservation and promotion of support for performing arts festivals.

The optimization of the mechanisms for supporting performing arts on state level and the development of a National Cultural Strategy are important conditions for the cultural development and well-being of society that does not tolerate further delay.

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Prof. Joanna Spassova-Dikova, PhD
 Institute of Art Studies
 Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
 21 Krakra Str.
 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria
 Email: joanasd@yahoo.co.uk