VILNIUS AS A EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE: INSTITUTIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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Introduction

On 14th of November 2005 Vilnius, Lithuania, was appointed, together with Linz (Austria), to host the event “European Capital of Culture 2009”. The European Capital of Culture (ECOC) is one of the most successful cultural project elaborated by European Union (EU) to spread, as officially proclaimed, an European identity.

The anthropological analysis of this event in its implementation in Lithuania needs a preliminary definition of the terms that compose the title “European Capital of Culture”. European capital is intended a town of a nation within the border of EU’s institution. The reference is not to the geographical extension of the continent that we define as Europe but to the political border defined from the bureaucratic supranational structure of The European Union. To avoid misunderstanding I will use the acronym EU when I write of the political institution and European when I refer to the geographical idea of Europe.

The term culture seems to refer to the set of different national cultures that EU tries to put under the umbrella of a more general European culture. National cultures have been widely explored after The Second World
War in the anthropological literature about Nation-States. It is already well stated how representations of national identity are produced and managed by agents (politicians, bureaucrats, individuals) through the rhetoric of a common culture shared by citizens (Anderson 1991, Gellner 1983, Handler 1988, Herzfeld 1997, Smith 1986). EU’s definition of culture has been more recently investigated (Bellier 2000, Delanty 1998, MacDonald 1993), very often it has been underlined its difficulties to become a real symbol of a new European identity (Sassatelli 2002, Shore 1996, 2000). Nevertheless, EU institution continues to work on an image of common european culture to ground its own european identity.

The culture agenda of the European Union opens with a citation of a Nobel Prize, Dario Fo, affirming that even before Europe was united in an economic level or was conceived at the level of economic interests and trade, it was culture that united all the countries of Europe. The arts, literature, music are the connecting link of Europe (European Commission 2007).

“The culture that united all the countries of Europe” recalls a concept of external culture, the one that we can find in books, performances, arts, the one that stays outside the individual, in theatres, ministry of cultures, etc. (Borofsky 2004).

The wish to underline a common identity of all EU’s state-members is also in the ECOC project. Its main statement says:

The European capital of culture is a golden opportunity to show off Europe’s cultural richness and diversity, and all the ties which link us together as Europeans. The event is so attractive that Europe’s cities vie with each other fiercely for the honour of bearing the title (European Commission 2009).

Together with the wish to develop a common European culture, through this statement, cultural richness and diversity, the EU tries to find the compromise to not interfere with each nationalistic representation of national culture.

To explore this last point it is necessary to move from a supranational perspective to a specific context of implementation. Moving the look from Europe to a specific context, in this case Lithuania, it is possible to take out other levels of analysis. The event “Vilnius – European Capital of Culture” (VEKS) is no more just a golden opportunity to show off Europe’s cultural richness and diversity, and all the ties which link us together as Europeans, it becomes a moment of social time when official institution, and the politicians and bureaucrats that manage it, through a national representation
of culture, reaffirm themselves as legitimate holders of power. Herzfeld already pointed out how a cultural performance can open space for public discussion where official national rhetoric can be presented or re-discussed, in a process that involves all actors (bureaucrats, producers, consumers) (Herzfeld 2001). The first part of Herzfeld’s idea seems to be confirmed by the reading of Vilnius’ initial proposal (Vilnius CV – Creativity and Vitality 2004). A first contradiction between EU instance and nationalistic view is underlined by EU’s selection panel. The selection panel in charge of evaluating Vilnius’ proposal reported:

The panel was confident that Vilnius would find a balance between national pride and its ancient role as a European cultural cosmopolitan meeting point (The Selection Panel for the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2009).

What is stated in the official ECOC programme of Lithuania is a chance to widespread European feelings among Lithuanian citizens (Vilnius CV – Creativity and Vitality 2004), it becomes in its implementation a possibility to reaffirm a national vision among Lithuanian citizens and to manage Lithuania’s image on an international stage.

Another level of analysis that I would like to describe is about the actors involved in the project. In this process of presentation/re-presentation of national culture, they have been involved, according to the specific structure of VEKS’ project, not only bureaucrats in charge of the implementation of the event but also cultural operators, artists and all those that answered to the call for proposals organized by VEKS institution. This segment of society can be defined through the concept of civil society often used to describe social participation of people, experts, NGO and association (Bellier 2000). This is a critical point of the specific implementation of the European Capital of Culture in Lithuania. Through the description of what happened in Lithuania during the implementation of the project Vilnius as European Capital of Culture I want to focus on the relation between official institutions and the segment of civil society involved in the process. I try to give a practical example of Bellier reflection: the concept of civil society allows multiple individuals and bodies to call themselves “representative” or “expert” for consultation by state and EU organizations…, and to answer her question: Which are the different sections of civil society which are consulted and how they reach the level of decision-making?.. To explain this process it is necessary to have a closer look to the organization of ECOC’s project in Vilnius and on the events that between the end
of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 brought the tensions between politicians and a section of civil society, the cultural operators, on the public stage.

After the selection process between European union and national governments, the second phase of the project, the call for proposals involving a wider and less manageable group of people, brings on the stage all the different visions of the different cultural operators. The tensions seem to be constant during the organization and implementation of the project but they come out when political and economical instances push politicians and bureaucrats to modify previous decisions about the programme. Despite changes in the cultural field, the public discussion between cultural operators and politicians focuses on the image of culture and of Lithuania that will result from the European project.

In my investigation, of which this article shows first data, I start the analysis from anecdotes, news and common discussion that widespread from media. Following Herzfeld's suggestion, I consider all those elements that before academic research, deep analysis or quantitative survey, reach public opinion and influence common sense (Herzfeld 2001). To connect the chronology of the events, as reported for example on newspapers, with contemporary discussions between different actors of VEKS it is important to note the complexity of the representation that usually are taken for granted by people in everyday life. I want to “make strange what usually we consider obvious” and, in doing so, to show the social actors’ hand behind it. In this the levels of comprehension become more articulated and it is possible to get back a better understanding of what it is going on in society.

**Vilnius as European Capital of Culture – Institution**

In 2007 the procedure was formalized and it established a call for proposals and a selection panel made by a list of experts in charge to select the projects according to the different areas of the articulated original programme. Together with this list of experts, also a criteria of selection was established. So, project already accepted through the first procedure had to be re-evaluated when the new procedure was established.

During all the period and until the beginning of 2009 all the planned programme and the relative financial support seem to be based on informal agreements. It is important to keep this last point in mind because it explains the real role of the VEKS institution. It has no real decisional power,
the main founders didn’t give any money to the institution, and each partner decides which project to support from the selected list made by VEKS. This means that after the different project manager started to work on the project that was selected by VEKS to be part of the programme, when 2009 arrived and it came the time to implement the projects; they had to face the ministry of culture and Vilnius municipality’s decisions. This reflection underlines the connection between the development of the VEKS programme and the political life and changes of the two main sponsors.

In October 2008, political election brought a new majority to the parliament and government¹. The former left-center coalition left the place for the new right-center group. In this period the first public discussions about the founding of VEKS’ programme started. The new Minister started to check and to criticize all the management, assuming also the possibility to cut the budget (Dvivaldystė Vilniuje… 2008). At this point the different projects’ managers, those that were already selected to implement their projects, claimed to become part of the discussion and, supported by VEKS’ management, they constituted themselves as association.

Civil Society

With a letter sent to the main authority, the prime minister, the ministry of culture, the head of parliament and different parliament members, and various projects’ manager tried to make their position official asking to know the procedure and criteria according which the projects already approved by VEKS institution would be selected by government².

This is the first moment in this event when a group of people involved in the organization of the project managed by a Lithuanian public institution proclaimed themselves as interlocutor of the ministry and the municipality. In this we can identify that process that, following Belier’s suggestions, makes a group of individuals a representative of civil society (Bellier 2000). It looks like another social actor, in addition to the ministry of cul-


ture, Vilnius municipality and VEKS’ institution, claimed to be part of the discussion.

In the letter there are several references to the value of culture, the importance of it as a means of economic development and the necessity to take care of the image of Lithuania in Europe. These arguments, that can be common arguments of political rhetoric, were used by the group of managers to support their request to be a direct interlocutor of the ministry of culture, a public institution, in the decision about the project of Vilnius as the European capital of culture.

The problem is that since there is only an informal agreement about the approved projects between VEKS institution and project’s manager this group had no concrete tools to affirm its position. The letter elaborated by this section of “civil society” involved in the European project was effective only through good disposal of the public institution, in other words, only if the minister accepted to consider it and to discuss it with managers.

In fact, the minister didn’t answer to this letter and continued with his decision. In the beginning of January 2009, when the cultural year of Vilnius already started, the group of managers decided to write a second letter, adding as recipients the president of the republic, the leaders of different political parties and, more interesting, they sent a copy to several Lithuanian European parliament members, in an interesting strategy to involve the EU but always through Lithuanian representatives.3

This second letter sounds to be more critical towards the ministry and, in general, government. It recalls the necessity for the democratic Republic of Lithuania to conform itself to the European Union and the world in the principle of continuity between previous and new governments and, in this, ask the new government to apply with the previous decisions about the projects.

If their statements were not considered, they predicted the risk to lose the right for Vilnius to be called the European capital of culture and a stop to the economical development of the country when European Union and international partners will know about this situation and the image of Lithuania in the world will be damaged.

It is possible to notice a changing in the style of the two letters. Through the first letter, it is evident how projects’ managers try to become interlocu-

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tor by recalling the same kind of arguments used very often by politicians in general and by nationalistic rhetoric. In this way, using the same rhetoric, they try to build a common background for discussion with the representative of public institutions. They move within the national border. With the second letter the managers claim the intervention of a higher authority that can make the ministry ready for the discussion and to accept them as a representative of civil society. In doing this, they bring the question to another level, by involving the president of the republic of Lithuania and by sending a copy to Lithuanian EU parliament members, the managers who try to involve higher authority responsible for the image of Lithuania abroad.

In one of my interviews with a representative of projects’ managers, he explained to me how at that time director decided to discuss all of the program’s implementation and, considering the crisis, the cutting of budget together with all the projects managers, in a way to find an agreement supported by everyone. This brought to a negotiation among the VEKS institution, projects’ managers, and the ministry of culture and Vilnius municipality.

This decision contrasted with the intention of the two main partners, to cut several projects, a decision which was eventually applied. A month later, in February 2009, the balance of power changed also in the Vilnius municipality, the changing alliance between parties brought to a new political coalition of the same color of the recently elected government (Dvivaldystė Vilniuje... 2008). Together with the new political concordance between the national government and Vilnius Municipality, it is found also in an agreement for a radical change in VEKS’ management. The former director is removed and a new one is nominated (Delfi.lt 2009). The commission of control was also created by right-center political side Vice-Mayor of Vilnius (Liberalcentristai nenori matyti... 2009).

With a significant metaphor, during a press conference, the new head of commission affirmed that “You can have a project to buy an expensive car, when the time to buy arrive you need to check the money you have and buy the car you can afford” (The Selection Panel... 2009).

Because of the balance change, VEKS’ institution got a new management and the association of projects’ manager lost the support of VEKS and a radical redefinition of the programme started. Many VEKS employees were fired, many projects were cut out from the programme and public discussion through media spoke on the effectiveness of VEKS’ projects. The three main problems that came on the public stage can be reassumed:
1) The World financial crisis that pushed the new government to cut the budget for VEKS;
2) Investigation about corruption;
3) The value of different cultural projects.

At a more deep analysis, reading also newspapers from that period, it is easy to understand how the three main problems I indicated are not directly imputable to the former management.

The first one, the financial crisis, found declaration of the former director that was ready to agree to a cutting of the budget for the project. The second one, the investigation, is wider than just directly imputable to VEKS management. According to the procedure I described that gave VEKS institution a mediator role and not real power in selecting projects, the investigation involves all the actors, from the initiator of the first idea about VEKS to the experts in charge of selection.

The third one is the most disputable of the three because of the difficulties in defining culture and the value of it. It involves experts, individual taste and political issue. It is not a solvable problem to define a clear idea of culture according to popular opinion.

Anyway, only the third problem is the one used by the representative of civil society, the managers, to discuss with the institutions.

Conclusion

The process I describe above moves in the context of the national cultural performances, suggested by recent Anthropological literature to be a new field to explore and to investigate the political construction of the common sense. The conceptual frame of the imagined community (Anderson 1991) is useful to describe the construction of a Nation from a structure of power, but it results are useless in explaining how the representations elaborated by a specific bureaucratic structure are accepted by people and become part of communal knowledge: the common sense (Herzfeld 2001). A useful way to investigate the last concept it is to consider the public cultural performances as a way through which bureaucratic apparatuses legitimize themselves. As I wrote at the beginning, actors of cultural performances are all those people involved, from producers to consumers).

In the specific context about the relation between official institutions and civil society, to investigating the implementation of VEKS’ project
makes it possible to analyze the distance that exist between the official statement and what actually happens and to answer Bellier’s question about the constitution of civil society (Bellier 2000).

Reassuming, reflecting on Bellier’s note the concept of civil society allows multiple individuals and bodies to call themselves “representative” or “expert” for consultation by state and EU organizations, the different project’s managers were already involved in VEKS’ programme, each of them as proposer and executor of their specific event approved by VEKS institution. After the political situation changed and new political powers came on stage, they organized their position around the common interest to defend their job and their achievement, claiming their role of representative and becoming an identified section of civil society.

To answer Bellier’s question: Which are the different sections of civil society which are consulted and how they reach the level of decision-making? the strategy of this section of “civil society” can be identified in two main streams, according to the two documents I referred to:

1) Through the first letter, we can get how the project managers tried to become interlocutor by recalling the same kind of arguments used very often by politicians in general and by nationalistic rhetoric. In this way, using the same rhetoric, they try to build a common background to discuss with the representatives of public institutions.

2) Through the second letter, by involving the president of the republic of Lithuania, by sending a copy to European parliament members, the managers claim the intervention of a higher authority that can make the ministry ready for the discussion and accept them as a representative of civil society.

The description of an institution-civil society discussion around the theme of culture and of what has to be inserted in the European cultural project is a good example of how through the rhetoric of culture other interests are at work. More, the projects’ managers, through the letters and the request of a definition of culture, try to legitimize themselves as interlocutor of the political decision level. Anyway, despite the fact that the capital of culture is an European project, both main streams, in re-calling a nationalistic rhetoric instead to refer directly to the specific problem, keep national dimensions and don’t cross the border of the nation. The borders of cultural intimacy stand despite European integration (Herzfeld 1997).
References

Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, has been declared a European Capital of Culture in 2009, and this official nomination by European Union constitutes another public mark of the process that the Republic of Lithuania carried out from their independence from Soviet Union to their membership in the European Union.

To manage all the events that were organized in 2006, the Vilnius municipality and Lithuanian ministry of culture established a public institution named “Vilnius – European Capital of Culture 2009”. At the base of the programme, there is the involvement of different social groups, artistic, cultural and, more in general, volunteer associations, media operators or simple citizens that, through projects, should develop shows, concerts, performances that can represent an official culture accepted as *trait-d’union* between the European union’s idea of common culture among all members and the specific need of representation of particular and unique culture, tied to a specific and unique identity, of the independent republic of Lithuania.

From another point of view, the so called “civil society”, in this case all those social groups, associations, artists and citizens can develop several representations of culture or, more in general, several ways of thinking about national identity, that very often can cause some tension with the official institution.

The needs, problems and ideas about culture can differ or be in contrast with the official representation given by the government or requested by the European Union. The expected participation of civil society (groups, associations, artists, citizens, etc.) is, at the same time, a resource and a critical point of the programme.

The connection between official goal of representation of a specific idea of culture and the statement to do this through the projects proposed by different groups can create tension and underline the different levels of meanings inside an apparent clear and unequivocal affirmation of culture.

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**Abstract**

Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, has been declared a European Capital of Culture in 2009, and this official nomination by European Union constitutes another public mark of the process that the Republic of Lithuania carried out from their independence from Soviet Union to their membership in the European Union.

To manage all the events that were organized in 2006, the Vilnius municipality and Lithuanian ministry of culture established a public institution named “Vilnius – European Capital of Culture 2009”. At the base of the programme, there is the involvement of different social groups, artistic, cultural and, more in general, volunteer associations, media operators or simple citizens that, through projects, should develop shows, concerts, performances that can represent an official culture accepted as *trait-d’union* between the European union’s idea of common culture among all members and the specific need of representation of particular and unique culture, tied to a specific and unique identity, of the independent republic of Lithuania.

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**Santrauka**

Vilnius, Lietuvos sostinė, 2009 metais buvo paskelbtas Europos kultūros sostine, ir šis oficialus Europos Sąjungos pripažinimas yra dar vienas riboženklis Lietuvos Respublikai perėinant iš buvusios Tarybų Sąjungos į Europos Sąjungą.

2006 metais Vilniaus miesto savivaldybės ir Lietuvos kultūros ministerijos pastangomis buvo įkurta viešoji įstaiga „Vilnius – Europos kultūros sostinė 2009“, skirta koordinuoti renginių veiklai. Programos esmė – skirtingų socialinių grupių, meno, kultūros, savanoriškų organizacijų, žiniasklaidos atstovų bei eilinių piliečių bendradarbiavimas organizuojant renginius, koncertus, performansus. Šia veikla siekta pristatyti oficialiają kultūrą, kuri yra tarsī lydinys, sukurtas iš bendros visoms Europos Sąjungos narėms kultūros ir konkrečios, specifinės kultūros, susijusios su unikalia nepriklausomos Lietuvos Respublikos tapatybe.
Kita vertus, vadinamoji „pilielinė visuomenė“ (šiuo atveju – tos visuomenės grupės, asociacijos, menininkai ir piliečiai) gali sukurti keletą kultūros reprezentacijos modelių, keletą būdų suvokti ir išreikšti tautinę tapatybę, ir tai dažnai prieštarauja oficialių institucijų pozicijai ir nuostatoms.

Su kultūra susiję poreikiai, problemas ir idėjos gali skirtis arba kontrastuoti su oficialia vyriausybės pozicija ar Europos Sąjungos keliomais reikalavimais. Tikimasis pilietinės visuomenės (grupių, asociacijų, menininkų, piliečių ir t. t.) dalyvavimas yra ir puikus programos šaltinis, ir kritinis jos dėmuo.

Siekiant oficialaus tikslo – pristatyti specifinę krašto kultūrą – ir darant tai pasitelkus įvairius siūlomus skirtingų grupių projektus gali kilti įtampa ir susiformuoti skirtingos iš pažiūros aiškaus kultūros supratimo prasmės.