

Summary Report (Searching Routes)

Summary report This summary record was produced by Péter Inkei with the use of the notes prepared by Erzsébet Rácz, the article written on the theatre aspects by László Deme, the blog of Marcell SebQk, as well as the closing remarks by Geoffrey Brown after the first day, and by Dragan Klaić at the very end.

Strategy cycles The audience had been especially looking forward to hearing about the four-year financing terms for cultural institutions, prevailing in the Netherlands. The majority learned at the conference that Flanders has a similar system. Even more astonishing was that the Dutch have grown sour of several aspects of the internationally acclaimed system and are wondering about a number of revisions. The presentations and the discussion highlighted the main aspects of the middle-term policy rounds: stability, flexibility and transparency. The contradiction between the first two concepts lies in the fact that (in principle) every cultural institution can win the four-year stability, and can also lose it. In fact, in Flanders some agreements are for two years, and in the Netherlands for as many as ten years. Interestingly, the Dutch and Flemish participants spoke almost as long about the shortcomings of the scheme as about the advantages – which are obvious especially if set against the Hungarian system. From all areas of culture theatre received the greatest attention. We learned that Dutch theatre companies are not favoured by the central planning system. There is little permanence, companies exercise their mobility among roughly 150 theatre venues of the country. Among the changes, eight city companies are being set up with an ambitious task and primary responsibility to be the stronghold of theater in the given city and its surroundings.

Great institutions A critical issue of cultural policies – especially at national level – is the place of flagship institutions. This term was used as in the Netherlands a “national cultural institution” (so typical in the east) is difficult to conceive, also in the complicated Belgian context. In fact the middle-term cultural planning system offers the possibility to any cultural organisation to become fully or partly a “national” institution for a limited period. This distinction, however, is based on output and negotiations rather than on inheritance and sacred dogmas. This is partly true in Flanders, too, where seven institutions regularly receive four-year pledges (nicknamed the G7). Prolongation, however, is subject to detailed scrutiny. With regard to the role and functions of great “classical” art institutions, a recently published Flemish study[1] was presented and discussed. The graph taken from that study proved to be a handy item of reference for the rest of the discussion.

Hungarian participants argued that our institutions would typically be placed in the left bottom quarter. As a sign of revisionist tendencies in Dutch cultural policies, it was remarked that although there has been a consensus that flagship institutions are not needed, they are coming back.

Goals The objectives of culture policies were not specified as an issue to discuss. Nevertheless it became obvious rather soon that public culture policies in Netherlands and Flanders are more directly engaged socially at all levels – from government through municipality down to the institutions. The latter are obliged to undertake specific social functions (education, inclusion, innovation etc.) for the public subsidy. In Hungary often the mere existence and operation of a cultural institution appears to be the goal and represents an achievement. From another angle, however, the structure of Hungarian public finances of culture is sufficiently socially oriented because a large amount of it goes on “köznevelés”, socio-cultural institutions and activities. Just like in Flanders, where parliamentary acts define the obligations of municipalities in the area of social culture at greater details than in Hungary. Although this is not so in the Netherlands, there (just like in the United Kingdom) more actions are focusing on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups.

Governance For a considerable time a dialogue of the deaf took place. When talking about administrative and political influence, or about effective operation of the institutions, the western speakers repeatedly referred to the boards. It was finally specified that in Hungary this kind of collective leadership and responsibility does not really function. It was finally concluded that the issue of autonomy is a vital dividing line between Dutch-Flemish and Hungarian (east European) systems: the boards of management and boards of supervision embody the forms and guarantees of the relative autonomy from political and financial power. Also, they are on the first place accountable for the effective functioning and management of the institution.

Debates The appearance of the Gielen-study is no isolated case. Culture policy issues are more often the subjects of public debate than in Hungary. The participants of the conference emphasised the lack of open discussions and platforms in Hungary. The absence of decision makers and heads of institutions from the conference was another symptom. Culture policy discussion in Hungary soon ends up in complaints – while in Netherlands in talking about money, according to respective national traits.

The market The simplicity of the formula caught the audience whereby while before the regime change 75% of cultural products in Hungary was made of public means and 25% belonged to the market, by now the proportion has become the inverse. Without quoting corresponding formulas, it was confirmed that the Dutch public theatre sector keeps losing its relevance. The subsidised sector is being encouraged for stronger orientation towards the market, to increase their own revenues: for theatre companies in the Netherlands, 15% of the subsidy is a required minimum.

Innovative schemes Preferential credit loan regimes have been applied in the Netherlands, too, but they fall short of the size and sophistication of the Flemish CultuurInvest programme (see more here.) Besides institutions and projects, individual artists can also get loans, especially for starting a career. Later on in both places various schemes make social conditions of artists comparable to permanently employed persons. At the end of their career, Flemish artists are entitled to complements to their customary pension. Brief presentation of such schemes could encourage the audience to search for further details when in need for good practices elsewhere.

Local culture The relative weight of municipalities (and regions, to a lesser extent) has been growing. The dominant position of states in culture policy has from the other side challenged by actions on the level of the European Union. The conference could go well beyond these unoriginal statements. We learned that Flanders has a robust system of endorsing municipal culture strategies. State subsidy is subject to six year plans, prepared along given criteria. The central government does not override local

goals and priorities but checks whether those criteria have been observed. One of these is whether the civil sector has been properly involved in the planning. Cities are obliged to operate an advisory board on culture, to employ a culture policy co-ordinator, and to spend at least one euro per citizen per year on culture. The move to extend the subsidy agreements with municipalities from one to four years in the Netherlands points in the same direction. Libraries, arts education, local heritage are municipal competencies, and in Flanders cities must maintain local cultural centres as well, partly financed from the budget of the government. The cultural obligations of municipalities, and the central financial contribution to these are regulated in a rather similar manner in Hungary, too. Nevertheless these prescriptions are not implemented as meticulously as in Flanders. Local initiatives We learned that what is a legal duty for each Flemish city, was a self-initiated enterprise in Antwerp, when in 1993 (connected to being European Capital of Culture) the first six-year strategy was set up. Miskolc plays a similar pioneer role in Hungary, with its exemplary cultural strategy, also connected to the candidacy for Capital of Culture. The conference could learn about details of the implementation of the strategy, both in the area of infrastructure, cultural tourism and the institutions: targets for the cultural chapter of the city budget that had grown double its earlier share. The strategies of the two cities can be studied in their original languages here and here. In Utrecht it was the theatre groups that came forward with an innovative idea. A bunch of small-scale companies formed a cooperation which created a new and stronger network. Their co-ordinated programmes take into account the projects of the municipality, especially in the field of diversity and multiculturalism. The habit of inviting outsiders to assess and advise about culture plans of a city was illustrated by Amsterdam, which commissioned Trevor Davies, among others director for Copenhagen European Capital of Culture in 1996. (In this context Tallinn was also praised for appointing the director of the local Goethe Institute as head of the European Capital of Culture in 2011.) International co-operation Although the event took place in the frames of a pioneer action in Dutch and Flemish cultural diplomacy, the first large scale common action, the Low Festival in Hungary, the conference did not produce ground-breaking ideas with regard to international co-operation. The two western partners are not planning to catch up with the Hungarian intensity of running a network of cultural institutions abroad – this was pointed out but not discussed at length. Summing up The formula of comparing three countries in the frame of a set choreography, yet allowing for ample interaction proved to be successful. The first rank Flemish and Dutch cultural personalities are especially credited for the good and inspirational mood which was taken up by the local audience. They showed up in great number, although the scarcity of personalities on a par with the foreign guests was a painful phenomenon. Their absence was countered by the activity of about a dozen students and lecturers of the Central European University from various parts of east Europe. Although the introductory sentences to the conference a less asymmetric position was foreseen as before, the prevailing tone was still that of east watching west for inspiration and models. That being acknowledged, the conference is kept in good memory.

[1] De Kunstinstututie - Artistieke Instellingen van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap door Pascal Gielen, Ned., 143 pag., Uitgever OIV, Hans Waege, © Pascal Gielen / OIV / Hans Waege / 2007. Read the introduction.