"The city as dialogue“

„Culture and local development in Gabrovo (Bulgaria) - from a shrinking city to a city of cultural transformation “

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All images, personal archive Mariana Prodanova

SHIFT

In 2014 the city of Gabrovo took part in the competition for the title of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) as one of the towns from Bulgaria competing for this title in 2019.[1] This was an ambitious goal. At the start it was not o approved or accepted by the local community at large. Yet, this was a cause promoted by the local municipal authority and by the cultural sector of the city. It was for the first time in the current century that the local authority and the cultural organisations were united by a „common purpose“and by the drive to design new opportunities around a common vision for development. They were determined to put culture at the very centre of policies for development.

Gabrovo is a small town of about 55 000 inhabitants. It is located in the centre of Bulgaria’s territory. During the time of the Bulgarian Revival period (late 19 C – early 20 C) Gabrovo had been a distinctive crafts centre. During the period of industrialization, it became a thriving industrial city and held this title till the 1990s. The ensuing post-socialist transformation, however, triggered an unprecedented dramatic urban decline in Gabrovo. (Most Bulgarian cities were affected in a similar way). The radical de-industrialization process entailed a loss of employment opportunities leading to the migration of local inhabitants. Many went abroad and till today, there is a migration towards the bigger towns in Bulgaria or towards other EU member states that is not simply an effect of globalisation. The trend has meant that from being a once „pioneer of industrialization“, today Gabrovo has transformed into a town marked by the features of a „shrinking city“.

For a very long period the signs of urban decline induced by the post-socialist transition of Bulgaria, was not a topic of public discussion. Neither was the „price paid“on the path to the current open market economy and towards a decentralised policy of development in Bulgaria. Gabrovo was not „a case“ of urban studies research papers that should have informed local political strategies coping with the shrinking process. It was only over the last five-six years that urban regeneration became the concept put at the centre. Culture-led transformation and the regeneration of cities became relevant to Gabrovo as a an example to be followed by the example of cities that had already gone through radical economic change, and it was to follow the example of other „places“around Europe that having lost their industrial base of development have been reinventing their identity through a processes nurturing cultural and artistic regeneration.

The initiative of the European capital of culture in which the town took part from 2011 to 2014 served Gabrovo as a precedent. It opened the door for a process renewing the visions for development, not only touching on the cultural and social dimensions but also transforming the

[1] The Bulgarian ECoC title is held by the town of Plovdiv which will be a capital of culture in Europe in 2019 along with the twin town Matera in Italy in 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en

mind-set of politicians and organisations. Since 2014, arts and culture have been integrated into the city development agenda as a driving force for development. Public support has increased significantly. For example in 2014 the Gabrovo “Culture” Programme had a budget of 50 000 EUR (100 000 BGN lv) and overall 15% of the local budget was directed to culture. There is a strong belief that culture is an essential part of sustainable development along other sectors of the economy. Still, this vision is yet to be shared by the entire community. Measures to improve the local infrastructure and to boost new demographic trends are now closely related to visions of improving the quality of life for the local citizens and for visitors of the city. Its cultural programme and events today go beyond the cultural agenda of celebrations.

Figure1 Freedom – Art installation in Gabrovo

MOVE

Thanks to its participation in the ECoC 2019 contest, Gabrovo did elaborate and adopt a municipal „Strategy for Culture 2014 – 2024“. The city authority and all relevant shareholders agreed that culture is a priority and also a factor reinforcing the development of the city and the quality of life in Gabrovo. This strategic document analysed and summed the vision for local development: its main priorities, the horizontal and sector-relevant policies, the objectives and tasks, also the implementation measures to improve public processes and the use of resources available at both local and national levels. (Due to its European Community membership since 2007, Bulgarian local municipalities profit from regional policies and EU-wide instruments underpinning regional and local development.) The vision of the Strategy is to promote Gabrovo as a powerful platform for international networking in culture and to stimulate relevant planning. In the period till 2024, the cultural sector of Gabrovo will be developed as a friendly environment for education, for experiment, for innovation and exchange. The ECoC 2019 application was a key trigger for the implementation of the Strategy, but its ultimate benefit was the process shaping this new policy for local development.

The above described process rendered visible one of the most important problems that still need serious consideration, analysis and a common agreement. An important challenge for Gabrovo is that there is little or no communication between the administration and the cultural operators of the city, or support uniting the voice of the cultural operators. This results in a low level of trust and conviction when it comes to „common goals“. There is a big threat of missing out on opportunities for local cooperation. The governing bodies traditionally underestimate proposals for change coming from the local independent cultural sector and artists. They tend to follow their own policy or base it on adopting external visions that are often not fully adequate to the local context. Cultural practices and external experts are imported as the „bearers of success“. With a rare exception they are not well informed of the local resources or of the citizen's vision and expectations of the future. Local independent cultural operators tend to feel excluded from the cultural policy-making process which leads to frustration on both sides or to apathy and even to refusal of participation and involvement by local practitioners. A major problem and a big challenge for the culture-led development of the city is the involvement of citizens. The city should design policy with the people and not for them. The task at hand is to motivate and encourage citizens who are curious and fully engaged in the process of change. Dialogue and sharing, building trust and reshaping the political culture are at the root of a participatory policy building that is yet to take shape.

Figure2 Etara Museum in Gabrovo

CHANGE

Tradition and transformation are the keywords for Gabrovo's cultural heritage at the bridge to contemporary arts practices and to inclusive lifestyles. The cultural policy has yet to become inclusive of independent cultural actors and spaces. Likewise, the approach leading to contemporary interpretations of the traditions of cultural heritage and of designing a new 'cultural landscape' need to be discussed and reconsidered. This takes time and resources. For the moment,

there is a blockage to innovation in the arts and cultural sector. The town's strategy emphasizes on the need to re-energize the knowledge of the past and to combine it in a holistic approach with contemporary insights. Therefore, the cultural policy must set the top-down approach to the past. There needs to be a way of promoting novel art forms and practices among the immediate objectives. Arts and cultural organisations experimenting with engaging new audience and testing business models must be encouraged and supported.

One positive example is the "Take me to the countryside" project of Gabrovo 2016. It is a sustainable initiative involving an intergenerational experience between the young urban inhabitants and the older village generations. Gabrovo is a municipality surrounded by 130 small towns or rural villages. This project is an indication that the city is already developing and implementing models addressing the problems of an ageing society and bridging the gap between the generations alongside alternative concepts of living together. These concepts are based on an attitude of caring and responsibility, where the generations share their skills, knowledge, experience and their stories.

People of Gabrovo are described as full of initiative and pride themselves for a peculiar sense of humour. It is full of self-irony, which characterizes the ingenious Gabrovians who excel in „saving" money and resources. Gabrovo is known as the Bulgarian „capital of humour" because it holds an annual cultural programme that is a festive and participatory extension of the renowned *Museum of Humour and Satire* in Gabrovo. Each May a *Carnival of Humour* involves most cultural stakeholders of the city, volunteers and citizens too. This is Gabrovo's biggest collective event, involving professional and amateur artists and the city's capacity to organise sustainable events. There are events and open workshops all year round. Gabrovo is yet to „brand" itself by this „humour city"theme as a way to address reality and to use change as way of bringing in a positive and playful approach to actual problems in society or of the city.

Figure3 Humour Carnival in Gabrovo

Traditional arts and crafts are still in high regard in Gabrovo. Besides practicing a certain craft and (or) holding a master certificate for craftsmanship, the term a "master craftsman" is still used for those who serve as a model to younger apprentices. They bear this title as a trademark of recognition of the local community's respect. The cultural potential of the arts and crafts sectors in Gabrovo is an opportunity for development yet to be fulfilled. The latter will aid the integration of traditional arts and crafts into contemporary societal dynamics by taking specific consideration of local assets. The „Etara"open-air ethnographic museum in Gabrovo keeps and displays numerous revived crafts through functioning workshops.

Figure4 Crafts & Design workshop in Gabrovo

Like most Bulgarian cities, public policies in Gabrovo in the field of culture are provoked and stimulated by cultural initiatives coming at European level. The independent cultural sector in Gabrovo, however, is convinced that some of its initiatives can be transferred and further developed at local and international level. One example is the recently created regional network of craftsmen and designers which aims for a synergy between craftsmen and designers, who becomes the vehicle for creativity and experimentation, encouraging creation and innovation. The challenge for this network is to become a European base nourishing craftsmanship. The crafts and design sectors in Gabrovo present an opportunity of a paradigm shift in planning and urban development. A change that goes beyond manufacturing towards a creative economy that places high value on human skills and creativity. The careful redesign of public space, of residential areas, of the transport and road system offers a broad spectrum of life-style choices and emerges as an important strategy for attracting residents, in particular the young and talented, who are vital to the local economy.

We believe that cultural policies are not a vision that can be imported into the city. They must be organically developed and designed to balance economic and social needs relevant to the specific local contexts. Gabrovo is a member town of the Pilot City programme for the implementation of

Agenda 21 for culture. [2] The „*Culture in Sustainable Cities. Learning with Culture 21 Actions*" programme provide opportunities for cities to participate in a learning process, on the basis of the shared principles and actions. Over the next three years, the city of Gabrovo is set out to become an open, modern and successful place, offering many opportunities to its inhabitants and the people from the region. There is considerable awareness of current trends and emerging developments and their significance. There is ambition and courage to take the opportunities for the transformation and regeneration of the city through cultural activity.

About the authors:

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[2] This is a world-wide initiative of the Committee on culture of the world association of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). The global platform of cities, organizations and networks learn, cooperate and launch policies and programmes on the role of culture in sustainable development. http://www.agenda21culture.net/index.php/newa21c/pilot-cities-eng/gabrovo-pilot-eng