

TOWARDS DECENTRALIZED CULTURAL
POLICY IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES.
THE CASE OF BULGARIA

By

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Abstract

This thesis studies the process of decentralization in culture in the CEE countries in transition. More specifically it seeks to answer the question what are the main drawbacks in this process, which have determined its inconsistency, observed in almost all CEE countries, and have led to many problems today. The research findings support the hypothesis that the core problem of the process is two-fold. On one hand, there is a lack of a revision on both national and local levels of the concept for public culture and hence, the necessary cultural policy. This lack of a revision is essential as it impedes the decision-makers to look at the investment in culture from the perspective of all educational, social and economic arguments related to culture. The functional dimension regards the units of local self-government and their lack of financial means, capacity and competences for the process of decentralization.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction and research design

1.1. Introduction

Decentralization as a priority in the cultural policy in Bulgaria has been highlighted in every report for the past twenty years (Institute of Culturology Sofia 1997; Landry 1998; Council of Europe/ERICarts 2011). This direction in the development of cultural policy is stated in the Law on Protection and Development of Culture (adopted in 1999, last amendment in 2010) and the Strategy for Decentralization, adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2005. However, Bulgaria is also reported among the countries, which “demonstrate declarative approaches towards European standards in policy making, still with many inherited elements from the previous system” (Inkei 2009). This declarative approach is especially obvious with regard to decentralization, as studies show that this policy has not been strategically designed and implemented, but rather eclectic incoherent measures and unsystematic decisions (Tomova and Andreeva 2010) have been followed, which has led to inconsistency and uncertainty of the process (Katunaric 2005), and to numerous problems and tensions observed recently.

As a result of the numerous yet eclectic efforts to instigate any reforms, certain alarming tendencies have been observed recently. The latest studies by the Council of Europe (Council of Europe/ERICarts 2011) on the share of spending on culture by level of government reveal that in Bulgaria for the period 2000-2009 there is a clear tendency of an overall decrease in the share of state financing of culture from 49,9% down to 39,8%, compensated by an increase in the financing from the municipalities – from 49,6% up to

60,2% (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). The municipalities in Bulgaria, however, have an extensive cultural infrastructure – a legacy of the communist period, which cannot be properly sustained with the available public means and yet neither the Ministry of Culture nor the municipalities have undertaken any comprehensive reform in terms of quality funding and institutional overhaul to create more efficient and functional cultural organizations. This increase in the municipalities' burden has only exacerbated the constant financial problems of the municipalities that often struggle and cannot keep their part of the above-mentioned share (Tomova and Andreeva 2010).

In the process of decentralization in culture numerous problems were revealed in 2010, which only signaled the lack of a coherent cultural policy. The Bulgarian minister of culture announced the intention to reform the state funded theatre system by introducing cuts and mergers of theatre entities, which evoked numerous demonstrations all over the country (Btv News 2010; Inkei 2010). These protests addressed the current bad condition of the local cultural infrastructure, the humiliating state of Bulgarian artists and the inability of the municipalities to respond adequately with alternative reform proposals. These events imposed two questions: 1) how decentralized is the decentralized cultural policy in Bulgaria if the minister of culture decides on the terminations of municipal cultural institutions, and 2) what are the main drawbacks in the process of decentralization, which have led to this problematic state today?

Regarding the process of decentralization in culture, Bulgaria is not an isolated case. The new economic and political conditions in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 provoked all CEE countries to initiate profound reforms in the cultural policies toward

democratization, liberalization and diminishing the role of the state. This was implemented through privatization and decentralization and although the latter is not necessarily identical to democratization, in the post-communist countries it was identified as such because of the former ideological use of culture under the tight central state and party control (Cherneva 2001). Therefore, decentralization is regarded as an essential element of the process of transition in all CEE countries.

1.2. Research question

My research endeavors to follow the process of decentralization in the policy for culture, as implemented in Bulgaria in the period 1989 – 2010 and to determine the current state of this process. More specifically, I try to answer the question what are the main deficiencies and gaps in the process of decentralization in cultural policy, which have determined its inconsistency and have led to the current problems.

1.3. Hypothesis

Various experts on cultural policy (Institute of Culturology Sofia, 1997), on economics of culture (Andreeva 2010), political parties in opposition (Dnevnik 2010) argue that the main deficiency in the cultural policy process in Bulgaria is the lack of a national strategy for culture. The current research, however, proves that this is not the main drawback of the implemented policy and that such a strategy cannot be useful in a period of transition, marked with uncertainty and changing economic environment.

The main hypothesis of my research is that the fundamental problem of the current situation is two-fold – a conceptual one and a functional one. The conceptual one relates to the lack of a revision on both national and local levels of the concept for culture and hence, cultural policy. The functional dimension regards the main units of local self-government in Bulgaria – the municipalities, and their preparedness for the process of decentralization. In my research I show that the process has been implemented with a mere shifting of responsibilities, whereas the local units of self-government have not been prepared for these. Therefore, overall, the process of decentralization of culture in Bulgaria can be described as a “dumping decentralization”, meaning that the state tried to dump the responsibility for the cultural organizations on the municipalities without providing them with the necessary adequate means and capacities. At the same time, the municipalities lacked the financial resources and the competences to do so properly. This inevitably has led to considerable cultural damages and institutional decay.

1.4. Methodology

The thesis is divided into 5 chapters. After this introductory part, chapter 2 provides the necessary conceptual framework for the development of the argumentation. For this research I use a combination of a comparative analysis and a case study, chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Chapter 5 summarizes the main findings and reveals the limitations of the research, as well as a proposal for further research.

The comparative analysis examines the process of decentralization in culture in the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The analyzed countries are: Czech Republic,

Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The selection of the countries is based on certain key features they share: 1) countries in transition from communism to democracy, which has entailed also a transition from a centralized structure toward decentralization in culture; and combined with 2) common current development (EU membership, EU structural funds). Slovenia is not covered since it represents a different model – the decentralization process started as early as 1953 and has evolved since then (Copic 2009); therefore, it does not fit into the observed set of countries in transition from a centralized towards decentralized system. Other countries in the region which I am excluding are: Belarus where no decentralization has been attempted; Ukraine, Albania and Moldova because of political turmoil and volatility; and the ex-Yugoslav successor states because of the heavy burden of the armed conflicts in the 1990s and the residual nationalist sentiments. The analysis studies a set of key variables and comes up with some shared trends and difficulties, which have affected the steadiness of the decentralization process.

For an in-depth analysis of the process, a case study is presented in the last chapter. It focuses on the development of the process of decentralization in culture in Bulgaria. The choice is made on the basis of a couple of reasons. Firstly, it shares the above-described criteria: Bulgaria is a country in Central Eastern Europe in transition from communism to democracy, and among the other fundamental changes it has commenced a process of transition from a centralized structure toward decentralization in culture. Furthermore, my background allows me to be familiar with the specifics of the environment and has been beneficial for acquiring and analyzing the necessary data.

This combination of the comparative analysis and the case study allows for an approach from the general phenomena to the specific case. In return, based on the findings regarding the specific case, the policy implications drawn will be argued to be applicable to part of the other countries as well.

Data selection

For the purposes of the comparative analysis I have used as a main source the information provided by the Council of Europe and its network of experts under the initiative Compendium of cultural policies and trends in Europe (Council of Europe/ERICarts 2011).

Regarding the case study, the data covers primary and secondary sources. The primary data covers the results from 5 interviews taken exclusively for the current research. 4 of these interviews are with experts in culture in 4 Bulgarian municipalities and the fourth interviewee is a former deputy mayor responsible for culture. The secondary data comprises analyses by cultural policy experts, conferences proceedings, municipal development programs and periodical articles and interviews.

CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Framework

Before examining particularly the decentralization in cultural policy more in depth, some preliminary remarks should be made on some key concepts and ideas.

2.1. Clarification of concepts: “culture” and “cultural policy”

It is essential to make the remark that the current paper does not relate to culture in its broad, anthropological meaning, as defined in the Declaration of Mondiacult as “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group” (UNESCO 1982). For the purposes of the current research the narrow meaning of culture is meant, as encompassing the complex interrelation of arts, heritage and cultural industry. Nevertheless, the broad meaning is equally important from another perspective – the way it is perceived by society, the value it has – whether it is perceived as some outdated burden or as an opportunity for urban revitalization and development, and how it affects the attitudes and hence the policies for culture in its narrower sense. From contemporary perspective this is conveyed in Landry’s report that “the argument for investment in culture needs to be reframed in 21st century terms with an interlocking set of value and aesthetically driven, educational, social and economic arguments to show the relevance of culture” for the future well being (Landry 1998).

Cultural policy, just like culture, turns out to have many definitions. For the purposes of the present research two definitions will be considered. On one hand, Landry defines policy as the steering mechanisms directed towards the achievement of goals in cultural

development, which is accomplished by the formulation of the respective objectives first, which then leads to defining a strategy, which leads to priorities, leading finally to laws (Landry 1998). McGuigan argues that “cultural policy is about the politics of culture in the most general sense: it is about the clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings” (McGuigan 1996). These two definitions are chosen due to the clear functional idea in the first one and the closeness to the ideological use of culture (which is essential with regard to the topic of the research) in the second one.

2.2. Participative policy-making

In a broader sense, the researched topic falls into the participative policy-making field. The notion, introduced in the late 1980's as a main characteristic of the “learning company” (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell c1991), encompasses concepts like democracy, information sharing, responsibility sharing, discussing, active participation of the various stakeholders, etc. These are especially relevant to the countries in transition in Central East European context, particularly with regard to the cultural policies, due to the fact that these countries experience the problem of (re-)establishing civic participation (Suteu 2005) after decades of one party rule and ideological monopoly.

2.3. How is decentralization in cultural policy defined?

Decentralization is introduced to politics during the post-war period, perceived as a progressive way for decreasing the overall burden of too much bureaucracy and administration on the central level (Borras 2001). It is based on the principle of

subsidiarity, stating that “decisions should be taken closest to the point of delivery” (Mundy 2000), which is as close to the citizens as possible for the relevant policy to be successful (Matarasso and Landry 1999).

The notion is widely accepted as “confusing”, without one clear-cut model (Borras 2001), or rather “complex and multifaceted”, one which has been “in vogue” in many countries for the last few decades, but nevertheless still turns out to be too elusive and all-inclusive as a concept (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004).

The most thorough theoretical framework of decentralization in cultural policy so far is developed by Nobuko Kawashima (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004), who argues that decentralization in cultural policy falls into three basic categories: cultural, fiscal and political.

The first category – cultural decentralization – is primarily a policy objective and should be evaluated on the basis of the policy outcome – narrowing the inequality among people regarding the cultural opportunities they have (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004). This category relates to the democratization of culture (Heiskanen 2001).

The fiscal decentralization, to the contrary, is about the policy measures, it refers to the public spending on culture and has three quite distinct sub-divisions (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004). The first one comprises the concerns to balance the public spending regionally for culture. The second one, rather widely used, relates to the ratio between the central and local governments’ spending on culture. Kawashima, however, argues that this might be quite misleading or can only partially be taken as a valid indicator. An increase in

local spending might indicate that the central level has withdrawn some resources previously available and the local government is covering the gap, rather than any significant output and increased effectiveness realized. The third type of fiscal decentralization is about the de-concentration of public subsidies among the various groups of cultural producers.

The third category of decentralization in cultural policy, based on the principles of democracy and subsidiarity (Borras 2001), is defined as political decentralization. It concerns the balance of power and responsibilities between the different tiers of government for designing and implementing cultural policy (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004).

Whichever of the three types of decentralization is concerned, it could be used as an aim in itself, or as a tool for achieving the other types or other objectives (Borras 2001). Kawashima points out that just as important as it is to distinguish between the three different categories, it is equally essential to grasp their inter-relatedness. She argues that political decentralization can contribute and facilitate the cultural one (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004). What is more, bringing decision-making closer to the people can encourage political education, leadership skills and develop local identity (Heiskanen 2001). Another aspect is just as equally worth mentioning: the above-described types of decentralization, no matter whether used as a means or an end, are implemented in certain environment with specific factors. In this respect, Katunaric draws the attention on the necessary prerequisites, which form a system and are the direct link between decentralization and local development: these are cultural citizenship (or culturally sustainable development),

local governments and partnerships (Policies for culture 2003). As it will be highlighted in the next chapters, these preconditions turn out to play a very important role in the process.

Based on this theoretical framework, the process of decentralization could be also approached from another perspective – with regard to the objectives (hidden or declared). Katunaric offers a three-dimensional model especially related to the applied policies in the South and Eastern European countries (Katunaric 2003). The first dimension is called “Titanic” – dissimilar attitude toward different institutions – one set of institutions remain privileged, patronized by the state, while others are rather left on their own (by pretext of the virtues of decentralization). This is defined by shrinking central competences in cultural policy, whereas the local responsible authorities and institutions are left insecure about their competences and with scarce financial resources, so that they cannot really react and produce positive outcomes. This dimension, of course, is not part of any official strategy or formally declared policy, but nevertheless is rather widely spread.

The second dimension is defined as policy leading to “fair chair” (or “balancing burdens”) among state supported culture, local support and private economy. Basically, the functions of culture do not change – the financial burdens and responsibilities shift between the actors, but this only leads to assimilation of the old public culture into new market environment rather than any significant change in the quality of culture (Katunaric 2003).

The third dimension is defined as “the new public culture”, but admittedly is still a hypothetical one. It leads to the separation of culture into two forms – the old one remains protected by the state, whereas a new one emerges and enjoys public (both central and local) plus international and non-governmental financing. It represents the public culture, while developing it by comprising many diverse projects and programs of sustainable cultural development. This may mingle with other sectors as well (tourism, education, science, etc.), where culture can contribute with essential added value (Katunaric 2003).

2.4. Other related issues and dilemmas

It should be noted that decentralization in cultural policy should not be perceived as a panacea and this thesis keeps in mind the debate about its advantages and disadvantages. Due to its advantages, however, which comprise among others better opportunity for cultural diversity, as well as empowering the local communities to be more active and participate in cultural activities (Matarasso and Landry 1999) the research makes the assumptions and argues that decentralizing is definitely beneficial for the transition countries. This is especially valid as compared to the alternative of a sustaining a centralized system that is increasingly incompatible with the advancing democratization process, political pluralism and cultural diversity.

Based on the above considerations, it is essential as well to draw a conclusion on the various tensions in a process of decentralization – the power struggle between the different tiers of government as well as the public authorities and non-governmental

sector; the issue whether the process is perceived as a means or as an end in itself; the perception and value of culture (both in narrow and broad term) in a society – as an outdated and hollow concept or as an opportunity. The current research argues that all these aspects are essential and actually define and steer the process.

CHAPTER 3: Towards cultural decentralization in the transition countries: common trends and shared difficulties

Based on the above analysis of the key concepts, the current chapter aims to look at the process of decentralization in culture in the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The analyzed countries are: Bulgaria (elaborated upon in the next chapter), Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The selection of the countries is based on the key features they share: going through a transition process from communism to democracy, which among the other changes, implied as well a transition from a centralized structure toward decentralization in culture, and combined with common current development (EU membership, EU structural funds). The analysis examines certain key variables in order to come up with some shared trends and difficulties and to conclude how these have affected the steadiness of the decentralization process.

3.1. From total centralization toward decentralized system

The fall of communism marked the beginning of new political and economic systems in the countries in CEE oriented towards democracy and market economy. The transition also affected culture enormously, both in its narrow and broad meanings, and the respective cultural policies, as defined in the previous chapter. During communism, in most of the countries in CEE, culture was mainly used as an ideological tool, the cultural policies were defined, and their instruments for implementation determined, by the official government ideology and its propaganda needs. Therefore, the main features of

the cultural policies were censorship and complete centralization of the cultural processes within the state administration (Council of Europe/ERICarts 2011).

The new economic and political conditions pushed for changes in the cultural policies mainly toward democratization, liberalization and diminishing the role of the state through privatization and decentralization. It should be noted that decentralization is not necessarily identical to democratization, but in the post-communist countries it was perceived this way exactly because of the above-described former ideological use of culture applied under the tight central state control (Cherneva 2001). Therefore, decentralization is perceived as an essential element of the process of transition. The process of decentralization turned out to have its advantages, but inevitably combined with many unforeseen issues and negative consequences. On the one hand, the post-communist countries saw the possibilities to implement the due structural changes to bring on more autonomous decision-making processes at the local level (Suteu 2002). However, at the same time, the whole post-communist policy environment was unstable, with changing governments and so were the changes in the cultural policies (Katunarić 2003). Therefore, in many countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania, etc.) there was a constant change of coalitions and hence, ministers of culture coming and going through a revolving door, who would start the job anew and would be gone in some months or a year. This was combined with slow turnover of the administration in culture, burdened with the habits of the old system. All this led to certain inconsistency in the implemented policies.

These inconsistencies and uncertainties at the central level were further combined and complicated with the transitional economical and social crises and national identity problems. All this led to the willingness of some local public authorities to break through the centralized pattern and to become more flexible and independent in defining and implementing their cultural policies (Suteu 2002). Here it is worth pointing out that some municipalities with better resources saw the opportunities and advantages of the local self-government to respond more quickly to the changing mechanisms and to promote the community values to build the regions and the cities as “attractive spots” (Suteu 2002). Others, however, could not grasp the opportunity of the shifting environment and were rather scared of the additional responsibilities. This has led to one of the tensions mentioned in Chapter 1 – the power struggle between the different tiers of government.

In general, the conclusions of the conference “Culture & Development 20 years after the fall of communism in Europe”, held in Cracow in 2009, show that the CEE countries have made a considerable progress regarding the development and transformation of their cultural policies if compared to their condition in and before 1989, yet if compared to the rest of the world, or the western part of Europe, the advancement appears to be less than desirable (Inkei 2009).

3.2. Comparative analysis

The comparative analysis as presented below seeks to trace the common trends in the process of transformation of the cultural policies in the CEE countries with a main focus on decentralization, its instruments and implementation. The analysis examines certain

key variables: 1) initial direction and development of the cultural policies, 2) presence/absence of national strategies and their effect, 3) the role of the units of local self-government. The objective of the analysis is to come up with certain shared trends and difficulties and to conclude how these have affected the steadiness of the process. The variables are selected based on the conceptual analysis in the previous chapter. The first and the second variables stand for the official cultural policies designed and implemented top-down, which corresponds to the decentralization categories defined in the theoretical framework by Kawashima (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004). The third variable – the role of the units of local self-government, corresponds with one of the factors, which constitutes the direct link between decentralization and the local development as already discussed in the conceptual framework (Policies for culture 2003).

The analysis bears in mind that despite the apparent similarities, each country has their individual specificities, which leads to various approaches and, in the end, basically as many models of decentralization as the number of countries. Therefore, each country is searching for and has to find its own way, which takes into account their history, geography and demography, as well as the experiences of the others (Policies for culture 2003).

3.2.1. Initial direction and development of the cultural policies

Based on the initial direction and consequent development, the countries can be grouped in a few clusters with certain similarities and differences between them.

The first group of countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia reacted rather expeditiously, without hesitation, to the changing environment and started a process of democratization and liberalization based on the Western model (Petrova 2010; Inkei and Szabo 2010; Tjarve 2011; Ilczuk, Nowak and Bender 2010; Slovakia cultural profile 2010). This was done by privatization and decentralization of the authority of cultural public administration and decreasing the too tight and detailed co-ordination and control of all levels of public spending on culture (Visegrad.info 2010). Estonia and Lithuania had quick reactions as well, trying to apply some combination between the Western and the Nordic welfare state models (Lagerspetz and Tali 2011; Liutkus 2010). The process of decentralization, as part of both, turned out to be difficult due to many constraints: lack of financial resources and lack of tradition of local self-government, contradictory legislation and outdated infrastructure in Lithuania (Dufton 1998); and the use of culture for national identity building in Estonia, which contradicted and hindered the process (Lagerspetz and Tali 2011), which is valid especially in view of the large Russian minority threatened by marginalization.

In Romania (and as it will become clear in the next chapter, this applies also to Bulgaria), until the mid 90's the cultural policy model was inconsistent due to the many political turnovers (seven different Ministers of Culture took office between 1990 and 1996) (Chelcea and Becut 2010). After 1996, however, after some pressure from the Council of Europe and later from the emerging non-governmental sector, the governments put more concentrated efforts into creating a new system, more oriented towards client-oriented satisfaction, the establishment of new and improved decentralized services and the financial operation of "arm's length bodies" (Chelcea and Becut 2010).

3.2.2. Presence/absence of national strategies and their effect

The countries, which quite early showed their own initiative for elaborating strategic planning documents, are the Czech Republic; the three Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; and Poland. Among these, the pioneer was Poland, whose first strategic document about the changes to be introduced was adopted as early as in 1993, The Principles of State Cultural Policy (Ilczuk, Nowak and Bender 2010). Currently the National Culture Development Strategy 2004-2013 is being implemented and it is worth highlighting that its strategic aim is defined as balancing cultural development in the regions (Visegrad.info 2010). Czech Republic drafted its first strategic cultural paper as early as in 1996 in the form of a White Book, comprising the relation of the state to culture, good practices of cultural policies in Europe as well as a proposal for improving the grant system of the Ministry of Culture. Later on it became a practice of elaborating plans in the form of Cultural Policy documents for periods of 4-5 years (Petrova 2010). The last one covers the period 2009-2014 and includes vision (culture is viewed as “ticket to the future”), specific objectives and tasks and measures (CR Ministry of Culture 2009). Estonia’s first document – The Foundations of the Cultural Policy of the Republic of Estonia, was adopted in 1998, but was not legally binding and reportedly did not lead to any significant effect, yet later on, the country started elaborating and following developmental plans, currently implementing Developmental Plan for 2011-2014, which sets the objectives of the cultural policy (Lagerspetz and Tali 2011). Latvia’s first strategic document was elaborated in 1995. Later, in 2000 National Program Culture was developed in co-operation between the Ministry of Culture and independent experts (Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia 2005). Due to its ideal character, however,

it lacked practical approach toward the economic situation and legal procedures, so new strategic document was elaborated – the current Cultural Policy Guidelines for the period of 2006 – 2015 (Tjarve 2011). In Lithuania's case discussions on the need for setting up a legal document on the long-term goals and tasks for Lithuanian cultural policy started in the mid 90's and involved artists, philosophers, politicians, and cultural administrators and the official document was finally adopted by the government in May 2001 (Liutkus 2010).

Two countries – Romania and Slovakia – elaborated their first cultural strategies, respectively in 1997, and 2004, under pressure from the Council of Europe. Yet here we see two different developments: whereas in Romania's case this first strategy is judged by experts as rather lacking a critical reflection on cultural policy's principles and implementation (Ratiu 2009), the Slovak one is evaluated as very important exactly because of the re-definition of the concepts and principles (Slovakia cultural profile 2010). Nevertheless, this early assistance had its positive effect in both countries, since currently both countries have their own developmental plans, reported as useful and successful (Chelcea and Becut 2010; Slovakia cultural profile 2010).

It is worth pointing out that out of the 8 analyzed countries only Hungary does not have any basic official strategic document. In the last years two attempts have been made to design midterm strategies, but both without significant follow-up (Inkei and Szabo 2010).

The analysis of the first two variables, related to the policies as designed and implemented top-down by the state, shows clearly what was stated above: the pressure for certain changes from outside and the experiences and practices from other countries (or even

other regions in one and the same country) are not enough to lead to the same desirable positive results. These could be used as an impetus and example, but each country searches its model. Yet, what becomes visible as well are certain similarities in the clusters: the countries, which reacted more quickly, declaring willingness and taking measures to transform the systems, could go through uncertainties, but would develop their policies much more quickly than countries showing hesitations and striking inconsistencies (like Romania and Bulgaria).

As far as the strategic documents are concerned, it is clear that these quite often remain “on paper”, which is understandable due to a number of reasons. Firstly, they contain principles and great ambitions, but the control over the resources for their implementation is in the ministries of finance. For instance, the recession in 2008 came seemingly unexpectedly and caused huge repercussions on culture, which were unforeseen by the strategic plans. What is more, these strategic plans are usually designed to balance between cultural diversity and the emphasis on national identity (as in the case of Estonia and Latvia), to improve access to culture, to boost profit making cultural industry, tourism benefits, etc. Therefore, these programs are inevitably inherently contradictory or compromise-driven and fail to understand the change of the position of public culture with globalization, migration and EU integration, but especially digital revolution and thus miss to pay the essential attention to the typological evaluation and evolution of cultural organizations, which is fundamentally necessary to make them productive and effective as provisions of public culture.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the strategic documents show certain approach – strategic thinking, openness for debates and reviews of concepts and values, in certain cases willingness for cooperation with the other governmental tiers, the non-governmental sector, artists and stakeholders, which certainly has positive effect on the revision of the cultural policies, together with its instruments, and renewing of the concepts and values. This is especially visible in the countries from the first group (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland), where there were a few separate documents being drafted quite early and then amended or changed completely soon after that as better approaches had been found. As it is seen in Poland's case, this strategic approach for redefining the concepts, values and policy instruments, has led to the advancement of setting the balancing cultural development in the regions as a strategic aim.

3.2.3. The role of the units of local self-government

Regarding the third element analyzed – the role of the units of local self-government, several clusters can be identified among the observed countries, based on similar approaches and results. Under this category, “the role of the units of local self-government”, my analysis focuses on the efforts put to gradually prepare them for their new responsibilities and the level of decentralization achieved.

Poland is a good example, where as a result of the implemented consistent policy, nowadays, most cultural institutions are reported to function on the level of local government and the system is defined as highly decentralized (Visegrad.info 2010). Sub-

national levels include regional, district and municipal levels. Noticeably, all of these have gradually acquired an essential role in cultural policy both according to state set objectives, but also setting their own development strategies through which they are quite independent (Ilczuk, Nowak and Bender 2010). The increased role of the sub-national governments is obvious also in the structure of public spending on culture: in 2007 spending of self-governments was 79% of the total public spending on culture and heritage protection, compared to 21% state budget direct spending (Murzyn-Kupisz 2010). Few points are worth highlighting about Poland: the budget for culture is very low (the general public spending on culture constitutes just 0.37% of Polish budget (Visegrad.info 2010); there are no arm's length institutions (Ilczuk, Nowak and Bender 2010) to decide autonomously on the cultural issues; there are no advisory, consultative bodies on the national or lower governments level and the standards of cultural governance have not been a point of much attention. But nevertheless, the reform has led to positive results due to the strategic thinking and the fact that the due reforms started very early and showed consistency.

Most of the other countries in the chosen set, however, e.g. Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania Romania and Slovakia, are still judged as not having achieved a satisfactory level of decentralization. In the case of Czech Republic and Slovakia significant reforms have been planned and applied and nowadays the respective units of local self-government play an important role in cultural policy. In Czech Republic the regions are responsible for the development of culture and establish their own regional cultural institutions from their budget. They also co-operate with the Ministry of Culture on the financial, conceptual and legislative assumptions for the development of culture in

the region. Towns and municipalities are responsible for the general cultural development. Some municipalities establish new cultural institutions. Some cities, especially the bigger ones, have their own cultural policy (Petrova 2010). However, the reform is reported to have been applied in a manner, defined with unclear rules of transformation, non-transparency of individual decisions and lack of a clear vision, so that the situation is still confusing (Petrova 2010).

Hungary and Latvia have applied decentralization of cultural policy simultaneously with their regional administrative reforms, which have been long, complex and difficult processes. Especially in the case of Hungary, this has had a very negative effect on the cultural policy and the effective and efficient role of the local self-government. In reality, despite the other tiers of government, the only level that really matters, besides the central government, is that of the nearly 3 200 local governments, most of which are rather small and weak. However, their relative share in total public spending on culture keeps growing at the expense of the central government, while the budget constraints actually drive many towns and villages into debt (Inkei and Szabo 2010).

The last group of countries, Estonia, Lithuania and Romania could be described as the least decentralized. In Estonia the 226 municipalities are legally responsible for the educational and cultural needs of their inhabitants (Estonian Ministry of the Interior 2011). This is, however, not functioning well, since they receive their main resource requirements as subsidies, so that they are very dependent on the support from the state budget. The resources are too scarce for designing their own cultural strategies (Lagerspetz and Tali 2011). In Lithuania the local authorities are reported to be

responsible mainly for the financing and maintenance of the cultural institutions and this limited responsibility is further combined with scarce resources (Liutkus 2010), which in the end does not imply significant role of the units. In Romania the system works on the principle of public decentralized cultural services organized at each county level as Directorates for culture and national cultural heritage. The same have been reorganized and are now responsible for part of the central public administrative system in various fields (e.g. protection of historical monuments and national cultural heritage, monitoring copyright infringements, support for NGOs, financing of cultural programs, etc. (Chelcea and Becut 2010). Experts observe, however, that the process was partially and inconsistently carried out in the past without the actual transfer of responsibility at local level and this turns out to be an essential limitation today (Chelcea and Becut 2010).

From the above analysis one discrepancy can be observed. This is between, on one hand, the fact that the decentralization was declared as a priority in most of the above analyzed countries from the very beginning (except for Romania), and the situation today, about 20 years later, with most of the countries still reported as being rather centralized. There is one exception – Poland, where complex co-funding arrangements have been worked out for several categories of cultural organizations between the ministry and the regions or between the regions and the municipalities. This discrepancy can be explained with the previously described three-dimensional model proposed by Katunaric, which is based on a different approach to the process – with regard to the objectives (hidden or declared). As it can be easily seen from the analysis and as it has been described by experts (Policies for culture 2003) – most of the countries fall into the first or the second dimension. The first scenario, as observed in the cases of Romania, Hungary and Latvia, is the so-called

“Titanic” model, where the diminishing central competences in cultural policy are combined with unpreparedness and insecurity of the local authorities and scarce financial resources, which leads to no possibility to produce any positive outcomes.

The second dimension is visible in the cases of Czech Republic, Slovakia and applies even more obviously for Estonia and Lithuania: this is the “balancing burdens” policy among state patronized culture and the local levels of government. In this dimension the negative result comes from the fact that there is no change in the functions of culture – the financial burdens and responsibilities shift between the tiers, but this only leads to assimilation of the old public culture into new market environment rather than any significant change in the quality of culture.

As already observed, Poland is a good example for a consistent transformation process and it appears to be a country, which might achieve the third dimension – the so-called “the new public culture”, if liberated from the many bureaucratic impediments. Yet the Polish model should be further researched for more explicit conclusions.

CHAPTER 4: The case of Bulgaria

*“The patching of Sofia airport became the universal model of adaptation,
which was applied to culture as well.”*

Prof. Ivaylo Znepolski (Znepolski 2002)

As the previous chapter suggests, the CEE countries going through a transition process share certain developmental patterns with regard to the process of decentralization in culture. Many of them are stuck in the “Titanic” or “balancing burdens” categories defined by Katunaric (2003). This chapter will provide a closer look at Bulgaria. By a careful examination of the development of the process of decentralization in the cultural sector the chapter seeks to achieve two main purposes – 1) to define what the real current state is and 2) to highlight the main gaps and drawbacks in the process, which have led to this state. The research argues that the current state of the decentralization in cultural sector is best defined as falling into the “balancing burdens” category, which has its roots back in time, in the very beginning of the changes, and impedes its further development.

4.1. Overview of the process

4.1.1. Historical perspective and development of cultural policy in Bulgaria 1989-2010

As in most countries in CEE, 1989 marks the turning point in Bulgarian history of transition from socialism to democracy. This also marks the beginning of the attempts for changing the cultural policy of the country from a totally centralized management of cultural processes and ideological monopoly in imposing certain cultural values, which

were the leading features of Bulgaria's cultural policy during the 45 years of communism (Institute of Culturology Sofia 1997), to decentralization and democracy, pursued in the context of efficient and effective management (Policies for culture 2001). This transition is essential as it presupposes a change in the cultural policy, based on fundamental shifts in the perception of culture, in its broad sense, and the interrelated role of culture in its narrow sense.

In this respect, it is crucial to note that during the Communist regime the arts were not considered as an entertainment but rather as a means of education and as a tool for ideological propaganda. It is for this reason that culture was perceived as the exclusive domain of the state and cultural institutions were created covering all spheres of cultural life (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). With the turning point in history a set of measures were taken for changing the role of culture, including abolishing censorship and administrative and financial decentralization. However, Prof. Ivaylo Znepolski, Bulgarian philosopher and art expert, argues that the transition was not accompanied with a transformation of the already existing concepts, values and institutions and that has been the core problem in this transition (Znepolski 2002).

The new definition of culture in the Law on Protection and Development of Culture (adopted in 1999) states "the activity associated with the creation, study, dissemination and protection of cultural values, as well as the results of this activity", which applies to culture in the narrow sense (Tomova and Andreeva 2010) and illustrates the lack of a revision of understanding of culture in broad sense. Decentralization as a concept in the national policy is included in the same Law as a basic principle, but this can be perceived

ambiguously as a means or as an end. Due to a lack of a separate strategic document for the cultural policy in Bulgaria, the Decentralization Strategy (adopted in 2005) can be consulted as the only strategic document related to the process of decentralization in Bulgaria. It defines the decentralization as a means for accomplishing other important objectives for the society – better services for the citizens, more effective use of the resources and better quality of life (Decentralization Strategy 2005). Its planning and implementation are analyzed below.

4.1.2. Political decentralization

During the period of transition 1989-2010 the development of cultural policy in Bulgaria can be seen as rather inconsistent, searching for its best way forward. This period comprised frequent change of concepts, measures and trends as a logical consequence of the instability in the political changes and 6 different ministers of culture only for the period 1989-1996 (Institute of Culturology Sofia 1997). One of the first crucial specific measures for political decentralization was the establishment of national arts centers on the principle of arm's length bodies with an autonomous legal status and budget. These were created as early as 1991 by the Council of Ministers' Decree 23/1991 (Bozhikov and Yankov 1998), with the main purpose of creating conditions for decentralization (Stoeva 2001). Later these were gradually re-centralized by transforming them into Directorates within the Ministry of Culture due to their inability to collect any additional funding (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). This policy clearly shows the lack of a strategic thinking for the development of culture and hence, the random inconsistent measures taken.

In Bulgaria the main administrative territorial unit is the municipality. Currently there are 264 municipalities. During the long transition process the state has tried to shift part of the responsibility for the local culture to these administrative units. This shift is based on the principle of subsidiarity according to which the decision-making for certain categories (including culture) should be taken as close to the citizens as possible. In this respect, based on the division of jurisdiction, the cultural organizations are divided into different levels: state, regional, municipal, private and mixed (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). Two of these categories – the regional and the municipal ones, are essential to understand the development of the process of decentralization and the power shift between state and local authorities.

The regional cultural institutions are established, transformed and terminated by the Council of Ministers on the proposal of the Minister of Culture, yet after a coordinated decision with the Regional Governor of the Municipal Council on whose territory they are located. The financing of these cultural institutions is mixed: contributions from the municipal budget on whose territory they are situated, target state subsidies, plus contributions from the neighboring municipalities to which they provide services (Tomova and Andreeva 2010).

The municipal cultural institutions are defined as legal entities with an autonomous budget, which are created, transformed and dismantled by a decision of the Municipal Council, in coordination with the Minister of Culture. The funding comes from the municipal budget. This responsibility-right sharing is further complicated by the fiscal decentralization, as shown below.

4.1.3. Fiscal decentralization

Different models have been tried and changed regarding the fiscal policy undertaken in the course of the process. In the beginning a centralized model was introduced, granting subsidies to the existing cultural institutions (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). This was implemented, however, in a period of economic crisis and reduction of public spending on culture, thus leading to decreasing the funds for some of the basic activities and de-professionalization (Institute of Culturology Sofia 1997). Later, competitive-based financing was introduced and the latest approach is the joint financing – by the national and municipal budget – of theatres, opera houses and philharmonic orchestras. It is judged by experts as an achievement compared to the previous ones (Tomova and Andreeva 2010).

The changing fiscal burden can be traced in the latest estimations of the share of spending on culture by level of government for the period 2000-2009 for Bulgaria:

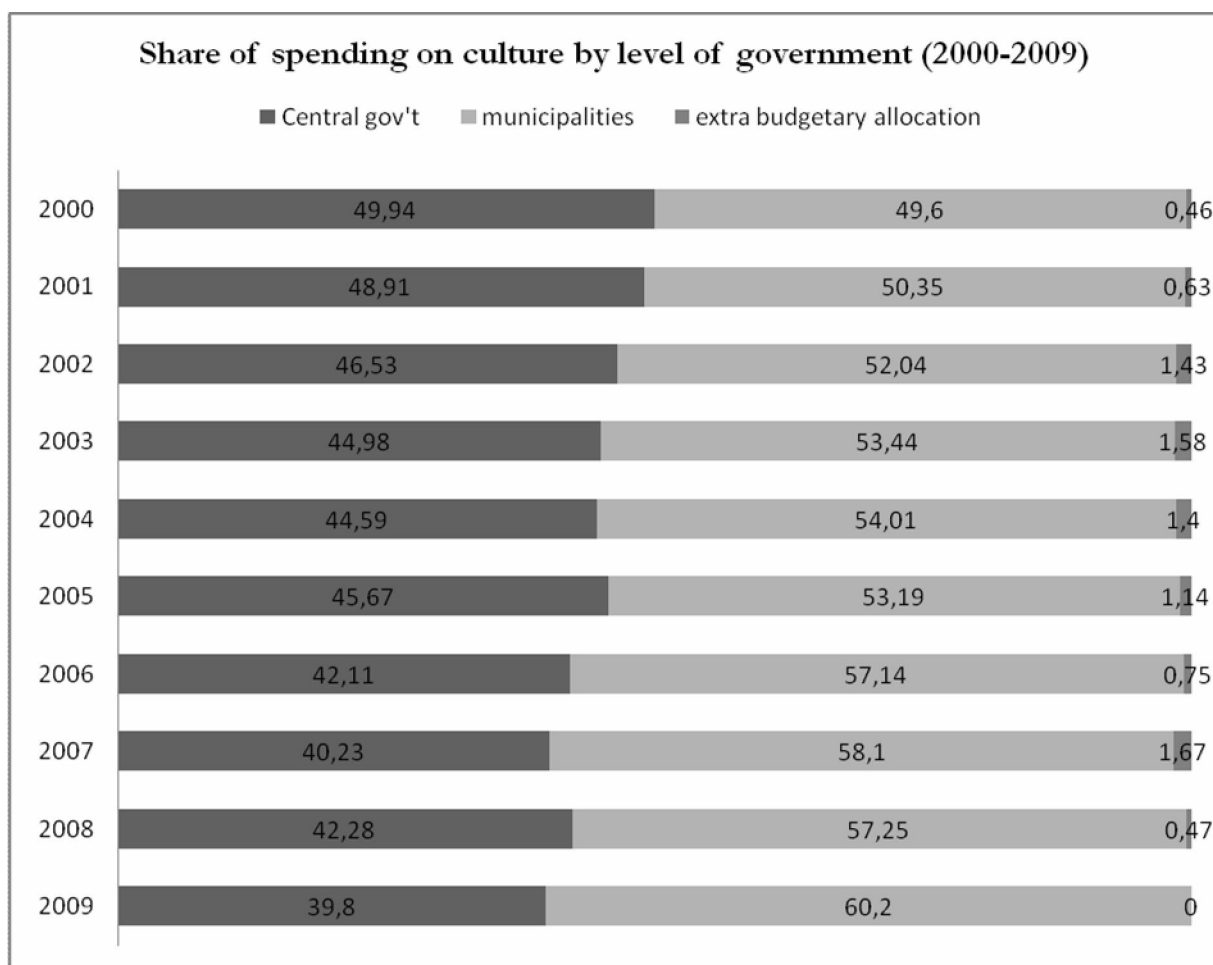


Table 1 Share of spending on culture by level of government (2000-2009) in Bulgaria. The chart is compiled from the latest available data presented in the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe, 12th edition, 2011

As it can be observed from the bar chart above, for the period 2000-2009, there is a clear tendency of an overall decrease in the share of state financing from 49,9% down to 39,8%, compensated by an increase in the financing from the municipalities. Tomova and Andreeva see this trend as positive and argue that this has come as a result of the attempts to implement real decentralization in the cultural financing system after the Currency Board was introduced in 1997 as a tool for fiscal and economic stability (Tomova and Andreeva 2010).

As Kawashima was previously cited, however, this might be quite misleading if perceived as an indicator for a positive development of the whole process of decentralization: an increase in local spending very often simply signifies that the central government withdraws some resources previously available and the local government is covering the gap, but no significant output and increased effectiveness are realized (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004). What does it mean in the specific case of Bulgaria? Firstly, this increase in the municipalities' share has been accompanied by constant financial problems of the municipalities; they often struggle and cannot keep their part of this share (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). Furthermore, if the numbers for 2009 are compared to the results of some of the other countries analyzed in Chapter 2, Bulgaria shares similar spending allocation by levels of government like the other CEE countries. Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia are not included in the table as there is no data available for 2009.

Country	Central government	Provinces/ regions	Municipalities
Bulgaria	39,8%	0,00%	60,2%
Czech Republic	37,6%	11,6%	50,8%
Estonia	62,4%	0,1%	37,5%
Hungary	30,9%	69,1%	0,00%
Poland	24,00%	36,10%	42,20%

Table 2 Share of spending on culture by level of government in 2009 in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Poland. The table comprises data from the Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe, 12th edition, 2011.

A few remarks need to be made here with reference to Table 2. Firstly, as it is obvious from the table, Poland has the lowest central government share of spending on culture and this coincides with the conclusion already made that it is the most clearly decentralized country among the observed set of countries. This observation, however, has to be perceived with one essential remark, which is best illustrated with the case of Hungary. It is also with very low share of state financing – 23.6% vs. 76.4% share of spending by the regions, but still it is considered as a rather centralized country in qualitative terms (Inkei and Szabo 2010). This is a clear example of what Kawashima defines as a misleading indicator for successful fiscal decentralization: it only shifts responsibilities between the different government tiers without leading to any significant output and increased effectiveness. Furthermore, what is often observed in many countries is that this financial decentralization is combined with a lack of skilled people in the local authorities and lack of financing for their training in new models of managing arts and culture (Varbanova 2003). This only comes to prove that financial decentralization cannot be perceived as an indicator by itself, but relates to the environment, the trends and issues observed.

4.2. Current state of culture on municipal level

The above-illustrated process of transition covers the political and the fiscal aspect of the decentralization respectively, as theorized by Kawashima (Kawashima 1996, revised 2004)

and explained in the conceptual framework of the thesis. However, a more qualitative analysis would exemplify better what the implemented measures have led to. For the purposes of such an analysis I use primary and secondary data. The primary data covers the results from interviews taken exclusively for the current research. The secondary data comprises of analyses made by cultural policy experts. These analyses include needs assessment analyses under the grant scheme “Support for creating and promoting innovative cultural events” under Operational Program Regional Development, SWOT analyses and municipal development programs. By combining these sources of information, 20 municipalities are covered altogether¹. The municipalities cover all the statistical regions in Bulgaria: South-East, South-West, South Central, North-East, North-West and North Central, and range in population from very small (Tsarevo with population of 9,626) to the municipality with the second largest city in Bulgaria Plovdiv with population of 376,726. This makes the sample representative for the territory of the whole country. The analysis’s objective is to find information on the actual current state of culture on the level of municipalities, their main difficulties and struggles and what their perception is of the role of culture.

In view of the analysis, one can conclude that the first obvious shared feature, explicitly indicated as well by one of the interviewees, the expert from Montana, is that for most of the municipalities, culture is not a priority (Vassileva 2011); what is more, in many of the smaller municipalities, there are no experts on cultural policy and culture is included in other departments – mainly sports, education and social affairs (Yordanova 2011). Hence,

¹ A detailed methodological table with all the municipalities covered, population, region and information resource can be presented upon request.

out of the 20 researched municipalities, only one – Plovdiv, indicates the availability of a separate municipal program for development of culture (Plovdiv 2005). It should be noted, however, that this program is listed in the municipal plan for development 2005-2013, but could not be found as a separate document and according to the interview from this municipality there is no working strategic document (Shopov 2011). This observation is important with regard to the perception of culture on the local level – with the exception of a few municipalities, which have found their approaches to integrate culture for the development of tourism (e.g. Gabrovo 2005, revised 2008; Sevlievo 2005, revised 2008; Varna 2011), for most of the municipalities culture comes down to maintaining the existing cultural infrastructure and sustaining a constant cultural calendar.

The most noted issue in culture on the local level is the neglected old cultural infrastructure – buildings of theatres, cultural centers, museums, galleries, as well as the heritage sites (Devin 2007; Karlovo 2007; Vidin 2006). Equally important and interrelated is the financial aspect for the municipalities. Often municipalities struggle to cover the basic maintenance costs, salaries and taxes (Myglizh 2007), and there is barely anything left for creating new quality cultural products, for doing research for enriching the cultural programs, for marketing, advertisement (Vassileva 2011), audience development, educational activities, resources renewal, technology related investments, etc. As a result, barely any new innovative cultural products can be presented and the bigger part of the annual cultural calendar is covered by the mandatory celebrations of national, local and religious holidays and anniversaries (Aitos 2011; Nova Zagora 2011; Varna 2011). This leads to inertia and disinterest among the population.

From the analysis of the process of decentralization for the past transition period of the last 20 years it becomes clear that it has comprised inconsistent administrative decentralization and unswerving shift of the financial responsibility from the state to the municipal budgets, combined with a lack of preparation in the municipalities for taking over these responsibilities and an overall lack of a revision of the perception of culture, its role and hence, the cultural policy. Municipalities lack the necessary competences and capacities to generate and allocate funds, to set up their own local priorities and criteria, to analyze and plan the necessary policy measures and to monitor the effects. This state is best described with the second dimension of the three-dimensional model proposed by Katunaric: the “balancing burdens” category (Katunaric 2003). As already explained in the conceptual framework, the main feature of this category is that the financial burdens, duties and responsibilities change among the state patronized culture, local levels of government and the private economy but the functions of culture do not change. This only leads to assimilation of the old public culture into new market environment (Katunaric 2003).

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that these shifts of responsibilities have led to well defined tensions between the government tiers, still observed nowadays. On one hand, the central government and the legislature are eager to decentralize the financing and administration of cultural institutions while retaining, however, partial control over the latter. This is further complicated by the second tension where local governments are eager for greater autonomy in the decision-making process, but still prefer most of the responsibilities, especially in the financing of culture, to be carried out centrally (Tomova and Andreeva 2010). These tensions impede the whole process and for

this reason a better understanding of the drawbacks of the process is essential to be pursued.

4.3. The reasons behind the drawbacks of the process

Various experts on cultural policy (Institute of Culturology Sofia 1997), on economics of culture (D. Andreeva 2010), political parties in opposition (Dnevnik 2010) argue that the main deficiency in the cultural policy process is the lack of a national strategy for culture. However, as it can be seen from the comparative analysis of the countries in CEE, presented in Chapter 2, the mere availability or absence of a strategic document does not always imply significant results and these strategic documents quite often rather remain “on paper”. Others draw the attention on the need for better financial mechanisms (B. Tomova 2003); better conditions for attracting sponsorships (Tomova and Andreeva 2010), the role of the non-governmental sector (T. Andreeva 2002), etc.

However, my main argument is that the above-described policy options can work only as supplementary measures. The fundamental problem of the current situation is two-fold – a conceptual one and a functional one. And all the other policy implications would not lead to positive results unless these are dealt with. What is lacking is a revision of the concept for public culture and hence, cultural policy. The second dimension, the functional one, regards the level of preparedness of the municipalities. As it was observed, the whole process was implemented with a mere shifting of responsibilities, whereas the local units of self-government have not been prepared for these.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

5.1. Summary of the main findings

My research of the process of decentralization in culture in the CEE countries in transition has provided the necessary information and analysis to answer the question what are the main drawbacks in this process, which have determined its inconsistency and have led to many problems today. The research findings supported the hypothesis that the core problem of the current situation is two-fold. On one hand, there is a lack of a revision on both national and local levels of the concept for public culture and hence, the necessary cultural policy. This lack of a revision is essential as it impedes the policy-makers to look at the investment in culture from the perspective of all educational, social and economic arguments related to culture. The functional dimension regards the units of local self-government and their preparedness for the process of decentralization. In my research I show that the decentralization in culture in Bulgaria has been implemented with a mere shifting of the responsibilities – political and fiscal, while the local units of self-government have not been prepared for these.

Based on these findings, my research points out that the decentralization in culture in Bulgaria falls into the second dimension of the three-dimensional model proposed by Katunaric: the so-called “balancing burdens” (Katunaric 2003). The process has been a mishmash of inconsistent political decentralization and consistent shift of the financial responsibility from the state to the municipal budgets, combined with a lack of preparation in the municipalities for taking over these responsibilities and an overall lack of a revision of the perception of culture, its role and hence, the cultural policy. Overall,

the municipalities do not possess the necessary competences and capacities to generate and allocate funds, to set up their own local priorities and criteria, to analyze and plan the necessary policy measures and to monitor the effects. Hence, they are struggling today and cannot use culture as an opportunity for development.

Therefore, I argue that all proposed measures by various experts can work only as supplementary measures, but unless the fundamental issues are tackled more profoundly, no specific positive effects would be achieved.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

The limited amount of municipalities examined in Bulgaria (20 out of 264) might be considered as a limitation for general conclusions to be made. However, the municipalities cover all statistical regions in Bulgaria and vary significantly in population. Therefore, these can be perceived as representative and the findings should be considered as correct for the process of decentralization in culture in Bulgaria.

Regarding the process of decentralization in culture in the CEE countries in transition and the finding that among these countries Poland appears to have achieved the best results so far, further research should be conducted with a special focus on its process. This would allow for more explicit conclusions to be made and for a more precise assessment whether Poland can be observed as a good practice in the region.

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